

APHANIPTERA



TEN ESSAYS

**AGAINST**  
THE **IRRELIGIOUS**  
**RIGHT**

MMX

## NOTE

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*Though the sequence in which the essays in this collection are presented is not without an element of design, they were written on the premise that each should stand on its own merits. The only exceptions are the Introduction and the Epilogue, which were written to situate the other eight in a discussion of how secular criticism of religion could be more profitably conducted in the future. It should be possible to read each of the remaining eight independently of the others without sacrificing the comprehensibility of the arguments made in each. As such, the reader is encouraged to read them in any order desired, as well as to pass over any not pertaining to the reader's interest.*



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## INTRODUCTION: ON TAKING AN ARGUMENT SERIOUSLY

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WE ARE KINDEST TO SAM HARRIS when we are least inclined to take him at his word. Starting with the least controversial of his claims, we need not take it literally when, in the Acknowledgments to *The End of Faith*,<sup>1</sup> he declares, “I began writing this book on September 12, 2001.”<sup>2</sup> To do so would shortchange him, allowing his detractors to dismiss his arguments as an overreaction to the events of the day before. Such easy dismissals are to be avoided, as they often sweep away the legitimate issues behind an unwelcome opinion. The more revealing and valuable criticisms must be earned, and they are earned by approaching arguments on their own ground. As the following essays hope to illustrate, the most dangerous thing a person can do to an idea is take it seriously.

Harris no doubt expected his readers to understand the implication. The impact of the September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 airline hijackings has been, in many ways, comparable to that of the earthquake which destroyed Lisbon, Portugal on the first day of November in 1755. In the case of Lisbon, we have had more than two and a half centuries, and the aide of works like Voltaire’s *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne*, to appreciate the shifts of faith and philosophy instigated by the earthquake. By dating the commencement of work to the day after the airline attacks, Harris marks *The End of Faith* as the beginning of a reordering of society-wide perceptions about the world and culture that we inhabit, not unlike that achieved by *Candide*.

Against the charge that there is more emotion than logic in his arguments, Harris would likely counter that much of what he had written had been settled in his mind long before the events of September 2001. The 11<sup>th</sup> was

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<sup>1</sup> Norton, 2005

<sup>2</sup> Pg. 333

the occasion that made the book possible, but we may reasonably assume that, rather than leaping forth fully armored, like Athena from the forehead of Zeus, the ideas that Harris would express in *The End of Faith* had germinated for years before the first word was written.

If this seems like a rather trivial point to insist upon: in itself, it is. The point is not that Harris falsified the story of the book. Only the most dry and literal of authors would prove innocent of that sort of symbolic gesture, and it may, after all, be literally true that he never before that day wrote a single note leading up to *The End of Faith*. The explication of that one admittedly innocent sentence merely illustrates that Harris' claims each entail a context, and that to take them seriously means appreciating them in the fullness of each context. Without understanding that *The End of Faith* is, in fact, the fruit of a lifetime (and more) of thought, the reader may be too easily tempted into supposing it shallow and beneath notice.

Much the same applies with the books that followed *The End of Faith*, and which are routinely grouped with Harris' as belonging to the "New Atheist" school: Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the Spell*<sup>3</sup>, Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*<sup>4</sup>, and Christopher Hitchens' *God Is Not Great*.<sup>5</sup> In some instances, we can see clear evidence of prior work on what might be called the problem of theism. In his career-defining work *The Selfish Gene*,<sup>6</sup> for example, Dawkins introduced the notion of the meme, in part as a way to account for ideas that seem to have outlived their usefulness. An example he gives of one such vestigial concept is the notion of God. That theme fades quickly from view in *The Selfish Gene*, only to be taken up again, both by Dawkins and Dennett, some 30 years later.

What can be plausibly suggested about the relationship between the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks and the emergence of the "New Atheists" is that the former cleared the stage for the latter. Osama bin Laden's exultant "*Allahu akbar*" deafened Western society to the strands of dialogue that had until then prevailed in discussion about religion. A momentary void was rent in the fabric of public discourse, an opportunity to change the shape and direction of discussion. Prior to, the reception that could be expected to await the sort of outspoken anti-theistic polemic we find in the "New Atheist" would have been, to say the least, uncertain. Since September 11<sup>th</sup>, such polemic has come to dominate in ways that would have previously seemed impossible, not least of all to the authors themselves.

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<sup>3</sup> Viking, 2006

<sup>4</sup> Mariner Books, 2008

<sup>5</sup> Twelve, 2007

<sup>6</sup> Oxford, 1976

Viewed in historical perspective, then, *The End of Faith* proves remarkable in the first place because it draws our attention to that shift in public receptiveness. In some ways, we are left with no other explanation for its success. Harris's name was virtually unknown prior to its publication; we cannot (as we might have had he been preempted by one of the established literary figures who followed him) attribute the success of *The End of Faith* to the expectations that so often drive book sales. The best explanation for its success may simply be that it gave voice to shifts in sensitivity to the topic of religion that pervaded English-speaking society in the wake of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks. To say so is not to damn the text itself with faint praise, but to recognize the skill with which it responded to the historical moment.

In doing so, it paved the way for the full articulation of ideas that had no doubt occupied Dennett, Dawkins and Hitchens for some time – or, at any rate, for their publishers' willingness to give those ideas vent in the public arena. Harris himself followed *The End of Faith* with a second book on the topic, *Letter To A Christian Nation*, further cementing his reputation as a public critic of religion, and more recently with *The Moral Landscape*.<sup>7</sup> And while there have been numerous other contemporary entries in the field, those four authors have been regarded as a veritable coterie, and have contributed to that impression with their references to one another, even going so far as to video and distribute a round-table discussion under the title *The Four Horsemen*.

Though the bulk of this and the essays that follow are written as though they were addressed to them, neither the authors of these six books, nor the books themselves, are truly the subject of what lies ahead. Those texts and personages are useful in that they prescribe and give definition to a nebula of beliefs, attitudes, opinions and agendas that have in recent years taken hold with a certain segment of the population. The true subject is something more nebulous and (I would argue) more far-reaching still than the books,

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<sup>7</sup> Norton, 2007 and Free Press, 2010, respectively; when it is unclear from the context which of the primary books covered by these essays is being quoted, the footnotes will from here on refer to them by the following abbreviations:

*The End of Faith* . . . . . TEoF  
*Breaking the Spell* . . . . . BtS  
*The God Delusion* . . . . . TGD  
*God Is Not Great* . . . . . GING  
*Letter to a Christian Nation* . . . . LtaCN  
*The Moral Landscape* . . . . . TML

or their authors, or the public debate they conduct. It may be best described as a concern for the state of public dialogue about atheism and religion.

The Four Horsemen claim to be motivated by the same concern, but the conclusions to which their arguments lead undermine the aim of opening discussion. Consider, for example, Harris' admission that, "My goal in writing this book has been to help close the door to a certain style of irrationality,"<sup>8</sup> or Dawkins' to the effect that, "If this book works as I intend, religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down."<sup>9</sup> It can be difficult to square such frank declarations of intent with the theme, common to all six books, that society can only benefit by an open and honest dialogue about religion. The political and evangelical ambition trump dialogue. The aspirations of *Breaking the Spell* prove, on close examination, more subtly mixed, and *Letter to a Christian Nation* seems to take its rhetorical cues from that book. A central contention of the present collection is that, despite claims to the contrary, there has long been an important public dialogue on the subject of religion. Far from having awakened society to the need for such dialogue, the Four Horsemen have narrowed it dangerously. Indeed, whether intentionally or not, their insistence that no such dialogue has so far taken hold contributes to that narrowing by allowing them to set the terms of discussion as though they were starting from scratch. In doing so, they clear away the contributions of entire generations.

At times, in fact, they are so successful at narrowing the discussion that they brush past not only their points of disagreement with their detractors, but also disagreements between one another. The roundtable discussion captured on video in *The Four Horsemen* proves most fascinating during those brief intervals when it reveals the issues on which they part company. Those moments of genuine disagreement are all too brief, pasted over as they are by the general will to present a unified front. It becomes all the more critical to note those differences, not in order to divide and conquer, but because in doing so we gain an appreciation for the range of opinion that can be encompassed by the common sentiment they represent. To that end, in the course of examining what they have written, we shall be careful to point out on what points they disagree and to suggest what those disagreements may mean in the broader context of our subject.

In the end, that subject must be regarded as neither the authors nor the audience, but rather the historical moment to which they have contributed. Part of the aim of these essays is to describe the shape of that moment. Those outlines encompass a particular kind of response, not only to the

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<sup>8</sup> *TEoF*, 233

<sup>9</sup> *TGD*, 28



events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, but to a perception of history for which the destruction of the World Trade Center towers becomes a symbol and, perhaps, a culmination. That response proves, first of all, discursive: a reshaping of other perceptions both to accord with the past, and in anticipation of the future. From that discourse emerges a program of reform to be enacted.



Perception, discourse, program: those are the general outlines of this atheist moment. Naturally, it is not the only sort of atheist moment possible, and another aim of these essays is to demonstrate why the shift towards another moment ought to be embraced without delay. No general condemnation of atheism should be inferred. Rather, these essays are meant as a clearing of the throat, leading up to a more productive discussion of the relationship between atheism and religion. The work of the “New Atheist” authors in facilitating this particular moment is no reflection on atheism *per se* – if anything, they stand in the way of an exploration not only of religion, but of the broad panoply of possible and present atheisms. When I refer to this atheist moment, I mean precisely that described in these essays. A new moment will replace it when another approach to the issues surrounding religion displaces it in public discourse. Just as their current preeminence serves as an index of the vitality of *this* atheist moment, it shall likewise signal the ascendancy of a new historical moment when the “New Atheists” cease to hold that place of honor.

But since most of what follows will be written as though addressed to them, it is probably best to dispense with this “New Atheist” business. There is, by this time, nothing controversial in noting that the label is something of a misnomer. The arguments levied by Harris, Dawkins, Dennett and Hitchens bear a strong family resemblance to arguments with roots in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. They provide some novel innovations – Dawkins’ use of the anthropic principle, for example – but have not significantly altered the main lines of debate established by Diderot and d’Holbach more than three hundred years ago. That our contemporary authors have touched off a new vogue for such polemic may be granted, but on the whole it has become such a commonplace among their critics that while few of them can dispense with the term “New Atheist,” almost all of those same critics seem compelled to qualify their use of it. While I have so far seen fit to follow established usage, it seems to me that the aim should be to reform the term or dispense with it altogether.

There is, I think, at least one strong justification for retaining it, namely that we cannot altogether deny historical change. If a group of intellectuals

suddenly came out in favor of the Ptolemaic model of the universe, it would be reasonable to call them "New Ptolemaics," even if their description of the universe corresponded in nearly every detail with that believed in by pre-Copernican astronomers. What would be new in those latter-day Ptolemaics is their suspension of belief with regards to the changes in astronomical thought that have taken place in the meantime. Believing in the Ptolemaic system now requires a different attitude, a different approach, than believing in the same system did 500 years ago. It takes effort to ignore or evade all of those intervening centuries.

Likewise, if there is anything genuinely new in the New Atheists it must be the rejection, sometimes overt, of the moderating influence of centuries of dialogue that grew in the interval between the Reign of Terror and the destruction of the World Trade Center towers. Precious little distinguishes their rhetoric from that of a pre-Revolutionary demagogue like d'Holbach, but to write from the opposite end of the history of atheist discourse, as though the interval between had only reiterated the context in which d'Holbach wrote, requires a heroic work of imaginative displacement. Indeed, the flattening of historical perspective is, as will later be demonstrated, characteristic of New Atheist arguments.

But on the theory that names are best when they describe their subject accurately, and that some subjects are too complex to accurately describe with one or two words only, I do not intend to content myself with a single name. In calling someone a New Atheist, I hope to imply something about how they (often ironically) frame the subjects of deity, religion and atheism. Different names, most notably the Irreligious Right, will serve when it comes time to discuss other aspects of this atheist moment. Using the most apt name for whatever occasion presents itself will allow us to keep perception, discourse and program distinct: good practice, since their connection may be one of historical contingency rather than of necessity. It is at least conceivable that a person could belong to the Irreligious Right without also matching the profile of a New Atheist. Whenever it is necessary to refer to them as a group, and in order to distinguish them from New Atheists in general, I intend to talk about Harris, Dennett, Dawkins and Hitchens as the Four Horsemen, a title that they have, on occasion, claimed for themselves.

Much will need to be said about the New Atheist's use of historical example, but it is in view of their impact on discourse that their historical perspective takes on particular meaning. Discourse reinforces perception, and vice versa. The opening of a dialogue is one of the professed goals of the Four Horsemen, and yet, the flattening of historical perspective entails a complementary flattening of dialogue. It is, in that regard, part of a more general tendency towards constraining public discussion about religion to a set of terms most likely to lead to the conclusions they prefer. The flattening

of dialogue, the insistence on a leading (or misleading) terminology, and the canalization of discourse towards a preferred end: when, as has become popular, a person refers to “militant atheism,” that is what I take them to mean. Likewise, when (in a lecture at the TED conference in February of 2002) Dawkins recommended militancy in his fellow atheists, I take it that he meant that they should apply more pressure in arguing against religion.

As with the term New Atheist, there has been some resistance to “militant atheism” as an identifier. The term “militant” raises violent connotations that have not, so far, manifested in the current generation of unbelievers, and the phrase could be taken to imply direct ideological descent from Marxist atheists, who were the first to adopt “militant” as a term of self-description. It will cause less confusion and offense, then, and will more accurately describe that aspect of the atheist moment, if I instead refer to the same phenomenon as *polemical* atheism. The linguistically astute will point out that “polemical” retains some suggestion of “militant,” deriving as it does from the Greek word for war. As we shall later see, there is good reason for that. The important thing is that, while it may suggest a latent element of militancy, the English word deals primarily with verbal, rather than physical, disputes.

In addition to its historical component, polemical atheism concerns itself with topics as diverse as the nature of knowledge, faith, and belief; the proper constitution of governance and society; moral conflict and relativism; science and, more ambiguously, cosmology; and the metaphors by which we understand and express religious thought and, less precisely, “spirituality.” All that may be neatly subsumed under the rubric of philosophy, especially to the extent that philosophy may be said to shape the terms by which we contemplate the world. We might go so far as to wonder whether the polemical atheist makes a rhetorical imperative of “opening dialogue” precisely in order to shape those terms. In fact, the word dialogue is usually a misnomer when applied to the rhetoric of the polemical atheists. They are more often engaged in the construction of what Foucault called discourse; that is, a way of circumscribing a topic in language so that discussion, even thought, may only be directed towards certain ends. As Dennett writes in the first chapter of *Breaking the Spell*, “The form our questions take opens up some avenues and closes off others, and we don’t want to waste time and energy barking up the wrong tree.”<sup>10</sup> He no doubt means that innocently, but much of what we will have to say about the books of the Four Horsemen will concern the avenues closed off by the forms of inquiry they prefer. For a start, it is worth asking how Dennett

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<sup>10</sup> *BtS*, 19

expects to find the right tree without “wasting” a little time barking up a few that are wrong.

More obliquely, Harris writes, “Every sphere of genuine discourse must, at minimum, admit of *discourse* – and hence the possibility that those standing on its fringe can come to understand the truths that it strives to articulate.”<sup>11</sup> It would take a Derrida or a Chomsky to fully unravel such an obfuscation, and I am clearly neither one, but we may begin by noting two ideas expressed therein. First of all, the phrase “genuine discourse” implies that there are counterfeit or illegitimate spheres of discourse; one hardly need guess which arguments Harris would place in that category. And secondly, the latter half of the sentence seems to presume that the truth of the discourse he prefers is already given. Thus the purpose of the discourse is not to arrive at truth or a dialogical exchange of perspective, but to conscript those standing outside of the discourse: that is, those who engage in illegitimate discourse. This stands at a pronounced distance from the program of truth-seeking suggested by most of the Horsemen in their calls for a public dialogue.

We see this concern with discourse played out in a number of ways. A decided contrast is discernible between the very vocal calls for a public dialogue and the sort of venues that the Four Horsemen have generally preferred. *Breaking the Spell*, for example, commences with a litany of calls for an open inquiry into the nature and origins of religion, but steadily progresses towards a position that ought to draw into question the sincerity of those calls. It may be that the contradiction apparent between that stated purpose and the end actually pursued by Dennett’s book speaks to nothing more suspect than the inconsistency of the author’s will. Less generously, the reader may be inclined to regard it as an index of the degree of duplicity the author is willing to indulge in pursuit of an scrupulously unmentioned agenda. To that end, it could be taken as an admission of strategy when Dennett writes, “Even if ‘we’ are right, insisting on it from the outset is ultimately neither diplomatic *nor* scientific.”<sup>12</sup> By comparison, the forthright admission in *The End of Faith* and *The God Delusion*, that each

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<sup>11</sup> *TEoF*, 45. The italics on the word *discourse* belongs to the original.

Indeed, it would be tedious to specify each time, so frequently is emphasis added by the authors themselves. Hardly a single page of *Breaking the Spell* escapes without a least one or two italicized words, and it would add pages to these footnotes to specify the origin of each, so from hereon the reader will be safe in assuming that I have added no emphasis to any of the quotations that follow.

<sup>12</sup> *BtS*, 376

author hopes to divest their readers of their religious faith, seems downright commendable.

The guided tours of the subject matter offered by their books and lectures; the heavily moderated debates; the televised appearances in forums like CNN: no stretch of the imagination is required to see the work of the Four Horsemen in terms of a public relations campaign rather than a society-wide discussion. The question of who is to be involved on the other side of the dialogue has often been carefully managed. Dawkins' reluctance to debate some of the more vocal exponents of creationism (like publicity-hungry and fallacy-laden Ray Comfort) is perhaps understandable, and we can hardly expect the Horsemen, whose schedules are so much in demand, to meet every request made of them. But there are other high profile examples that draw into question the sincerity of their emphatic calls for a fair and balanced inquiry. One such instance is the non-profit organization founded by Harris in 2007. Dubbed Project Reason, it purportedly "seeks to encourage critical thinking and wise public policy through a variety of interrelated projects" with a "special focus" on religion.<sup>13</sup> Yet its advisory board offers little promise that the Project itself will make room for dissenting voices, made up as it is of the Four Horsemen themselves and a litany of figures already prominently identified with their work, not limited to novelists Ian McEwan and Salman Rushdie, television writer Brent Forrester, and comedian Bill Maher. Unsurprisingly, its dossier of current projects departs little from the programs described in the books of the Horsemen. Perhaps the most prominent joint venture so far undertaken by Project Reason is the promotion of the books by the Four Horsemen, the dust-jackets of which feature the praise of its advisory board.<sup>14</sup>

A less institutional example may better illustrate the general attitude that seems to underlie the polemical atheist treatment of public discourse. On Dawkins' website may be found a page listing many of the published rebuttals to the Horsemen's books, listed under the title "The Fleas." The allusion is to Yeat's poem "To A Poet...", which ends, "But was there ever a dog that praised its fleas."<sup>15</sup> Yeats' poem was meant to explain his refusal to praise certain poets who mimicked his verse; Dawkins' reference seems calculated rather to dismiss (even as it recognizes) his critics. As ungenerous as this may have been on Yeats' part, it is all the more so

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.project-reason.org/about/>

<sup>14</sup> Cf. the dust jacket of the first edition of *The Moral Landscape*, the back of which is adorned by four quotations in its praise, all from Project Reason members.

<sup>15</sup> <http://richarddawkins.net/fleas> (accessed July, 2010)

coming from an author who has received exactly the sort of debate his book calls for.

A similar, though less smirking, dichotomy may be found on Harris' website. There, under the heading "Recommended," we find a list of Harris-approved books which is, in turn, divided into several subcategories. "Religion and Religious Criticism" appears at the top of that list, and though it includes the books of his fellow Horsemen, books by authors responding to *The End of Faith* and *Letter to a Christian Nation* are sequestered on a separate page entitled "Harris' Critics." At the top of that page sits a disclaimer – "I can't truly 'recommend' these books, but I thought readers should be made aware of them"<sup>16</sup> – suggesting a grudging acknowledgment made only in order to conform to something approximating the spirit of dialogue. Harris gives no indication of having attempted to take such counter-arguments seriously, and indeed, both *Letter to a Christian Nation* and *The Moral Landscape* are heavy-laden with *a priori* rationalizations for refusing to take this or that argument seriously.<sup>17</sup> There is no reason to think, then, that Harris will extend to the present essays the courtesy they extend to him.

Even so, the disclaimer on Harris' site proves charitable compared to Dawkins' explanation. The list of Fleas is preceded by a legend explaining that, "Many 'parasitic' authors have released books which use Richard's name or titles to sell their own books [...]. Similar books have appeared which capitalize on success by Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens."<sup>18</sup> That description suggests the phantom of neutrality, but the list features no fleas in the sense of imitators, as Yeats used the term, only dissenters. Surely there are books in favor of the Horsemen's positions that could plausibly be categorized as fleas; perhaps listing those books would have struck too close to home. After all, it could be asked how Dawkins and Hitchens managed to pass as dogs rather than fleas, since their books could be said to imitate and capitalize on the success of *The End of Faith*. No, the point of the list seems unambiguous: only those who disagree qualify as "parasitic." Nor does the page give any indication that those books or essays might have been published out of the desire to tender genuine contributions to the discussion. All who would respond to their claims are thereby thrown on the defensive, forced to explain the same sort of financial reward and publicity that the Horsemen themselves have so unapologetically accrued.

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<sup>16</sup> [http://www.samharris.org/site/book\\_category\\_reading\\_list/C39/](http://www.samharris.org/site/book_category_reading_list/C39/)

<sup>17</sup> See "Landscapes and Zeitgeists" for examples from *The Moral Landscape*.

<sup>18</sup> <http://richarddawkins.net/fleas>



In the final analysis, discourse may be unavoidable, but like any potent cultural tool, our choice of how to employ it has consequences for the form our societies take. These essays have been written from the conviction that history has revealed certain dangers, potentially fatal, in the sort of discourse revived in the last decade. In principle, atheist polemic could take any number of forms. Atheist anarchists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, for example, crafted their polemic as a reaction against the authoritarian and monarchical symbols of Judeo-Christian religion; religion was to be rejected because it was simply another form of governance, covertly supporting archaisms like property and social hierarchy. In part, it is the relationship of New Atheism to polemical atheism that distinguishes the present atheist moment from many of the past and potential moments in whose place it stands. That polemic has been furnished almost exclusively by the New Atheists. In doing so, New Atheism has revived the polemic of the 18<sup>th</sup> century with only fleeting recognition of the lessons of modernity. Likewise, their rejection of much of the best that has been written, said and done since the Reign of Terror has made it all but impossible to suppose that they will see the defects in that polemic. The 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries preferred a wealth of dialogue about religion; all of that is lost from view in this atheist moment. All that remains are the latter-day reflections of the 18<sup>th</sup> century rejection: Freud's *The Future of an Illusion*, Russell's *Why I Am Not a Christian*, and so on.

To make the point more explicit: an objection to the heirs of 18<sup>th</sup> century anti-theism is not an attempt to close the doors on the public discussion over religion and atheism. Rather, the opposite is needed, a discussion that tests the limits of narrow discourse. The first step towards that is an open, informed and intensive questioning of the terms that currently dominate popular discourse. To put an even finer point on it, the interests of those who describe themselves as atheists are, I would contend, best served by parting ways with the discourse prescribed by the Four Horsemen, not in favor of an acquiescent retreat or an affable lack of conviction, but in order to make room for approaches and attitudes less favorable to the fatal denials of their historical idealism and the language of zero-sum conflict.

And finally, it is the aim of this work to demonstrate that such rhetoric is not only incorrect, but also irresponsible. It is for precisely that reason that we cannot simply ignore it. Indeed, I intend to be least generous when I am taking it most seriously. To the degree that their discourse prevails over other modes of discussion, we will find that potentially beneficial avenues seem to mysteriously close before us. Our adopted incapacity for talking about them in any but the most dismissive terms will put those avenues

beyond reach and, perhaps, out of mind as well as sight. For some, that is precisely the point, since it is their aim to steer society in another direction. The irresponsibility we find in their work is a tactical gamble, one they may have been more hesitant to indulge had they taken to heart the counsel of history. The work of this polemical atheism is riddled with faulty principles, ill-conceived analogies, leaps of reason and faith, figures of speech and rhetorical attitudes that could all too easily become the kindling of a less humane reaction to religion. Already in the work of the Four Horsemen we see the rudiments of policy taking shape, and the intimation of political and legal solutions to what they present as religious problems. The culmination of the responses we find in the New Atheism, and the discourse of the polemical atheism it facilitates, is a program indicative of what I shall call the Irreligious Right. But more on that in another essay.

To summarize: The texts compassed by these essays – *The End of Faith*, *The God Delusion*, *Breaking the Spell*, *God Is Not Great*, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, and *The Moral Landscape*, as well as an assortment of smaller, supplementary texts and utterances by the same authors – describe the participation of certain atheists in a transitional moment in history. In general terms, that moment may be said to consist of a particular set of perceptions, a carefully constrained form of discourse, and a program with social, cultural and political implications. To designate a person a New Atheist, a polemical atheist, or a member of the Irreligious Right is to indicate their participation in each of those activities, respectively. While there is no necessary connection between them, what is characteristic of the prime movers of this transition is their participation in all three; they draw New Atheism, polemical atheism, and the Irreligious Right into relation. That is demonstrably the case when it comes to the so-called Four Horsemen. An atheist need not be as polemical as Harris, or as political as Hitchens, as diagnostic as Dennett, or as convinced of an ideal of history as Dawkins in order to participate. The variable involvement of the Horsemen no doubt illustrates the heterogeneity of their less visible counterparts.

And finally, all of this contributes to circumstances that have a deleterious effect on public discourse about religion, and incline towards public policy that would erode much of what is most promising about the culture that grew out of the very Enlightenment movement the Four Horsemen presume to defend. If we hope to understand religion and its relation to civil society, it is important to break the constraints of this atheist moment and work towards a more fruitful polyphony. My hope is that the essays to follow, of which the preceding is but an outline, will open the way to that end.



## THE FLATTENING OF HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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TO PUT THE CENTRAL CLAIM of Young Earth Creationism in historical perspective, Harris comments: “This means that 120 million of us place the big bang 2,500 years *after* the Babylonians and Sumerians learned to brew beer.”<sup>1</sup> This implies a flattening of historical perspective of several orders of magnitude, one that, New Atheists argue, involves the believer in a dangerous distortion of reality. Ironical, then, that a similar flattening of perspective proves so characteristic of New Atheist arguments. Not at the ends, of course: when it comes to the theoretical age of the universe, or the expected lifespan of the solar system, they can be relied upon to keep abreast of the latest estimates. But when called upon to deal with the messy and decidedly human province of recorded history, they are prone to distortion.

That would be a minor complaint were it not for the degree to which they rely on a particular presentation of religious history to make their case against religion. The Four Horsemen are practically united in presenting a vision of history as a prolonged clash of secular and theocratic civilizations, brought to a final head by the introduction of nuclear weapons. The flatness of that historical view can be made apparent by contrasting it with a more thorough examination of the actual and winding path of history, but the New Atheists prefer to deal with isolated examples. By the lopsided accumulation of such examples, they sometimes achieve the illusion of depth.

It is easy to fall into the habit of talking about history in terms that are actually far more expansive than the scope we are, at any given time, capable of taking into view. We speak rather casually about the whole sweep of human history, or of the events of a particular era, as though it

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<sup>1</sup> *TEoF*, 17

were not treacherous to deal with large swaths of time as a conceptual unity. An historical account is always a limited account, conditioned by a series of choices that are, with any luck, contrived to include all that is most germane and omit only what can be overlooked without compromising our intellectual honesty. Savvy readers of history must continually bear in mind that any given account results from just that sort of decision-making process, and exercise as best they can a critical faculty that will allow them to sort out omissions of convenience and inclusions of necessity from the agendas that might otherwise encourage a historian to sway their reader into a false interpretation.

It may be best to begin by taking stock of the sort of arguments the New Atheists hope to establish through their use of historical example. In the first chapter of *The End of Faith*, Harris presents the following list of conflicts, described in terms of the religious affiliations of the groups involved:

The recent conflicts in Palestine (Jews v. Muslims), the Balkans (Orthodox Serbians v. Catholic Croats; Orthodox Serbians v. Bosnian and Albanian Muslims), Northern Ireland (Protestants v. Catholics), Kashmir (Muslims v. Hindu), Sudan (Muslims v. Christians and animists), Nigeria (Muslims v. Christians), Ethiopia and Eritrea (Muslims v. Christians), Sri Lanka (Sinhalese Buddhists v. Tamil Hindus), Indonesia (Muslims v. Timorese Christians), and the Caucasus (Orthodox Russians v. Chechen Muslims; Muslim Azerbaijanis v. Catholic and Orthodox Armenians) are merely a few cases in point.<sup>2</sup>

Harris seems to have rather high expectations for these examples. He presents them specifically as object lessons in the dangers of divergent religious belief. "These events should strike us like psychological experiments run amok," he writes, "for that is what they are. Give people divergent, irreconcilable, and untestable notions about what happens after death, and then oblige them to live together with limited resources. The result is just what we see: an unending cycle of murder and cease-fire."

It is true that newspaper reports (which, as we shall see in a moment, Harris often depends upon for his background on such examples) present such conflicts in terms of the religious affiliations of the groups involved. I have no intention of disputing the correlations implied by such results, but an examination into each individual case will often complicate any

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<sup>2</sup> *TEoF*, 26

suggestion that those religious affiliations are sufficient to explain the events to which they are attached. To illustrate, it will suffice to follow Harris' own example. He sharpens the focus first on the large-scale, post-partition animosity between India and Pakistan, then on what were, at the time of the publication of *The End of Faith*, the still recent riots in the region of Gujarat.

The westernmost state in India, Gujarat has a mixed Hindu and Muslim population that has, in recent decades, been prone to outbursts of violence across demographic lines. In 2002, violence again broke forth, first in the burning of passenger cars in a train returning from a Hindu shrine, killing 59 people, and then, in riots led largely against the Muslim population of the city, in which the death toll may have included as many as 2,000 people, mostly Muslim.

For Harris, the explanation is both obvious and simple: Religious communities are characteristically hostile towards communities of a different religious persuasion, and the strong lines drawn around religious identities in Gujarat made violent conflict all but inevitable. Any potential for peaceful reconciliation was eroded by the role played by faith in inter-communal relations. Faith insulated believers from criticism; faith justified any behavior in defense of the religious community. And just in case the reader is tempted to put special emphasis on his earlier mention of limited resources, Harris narrows his claim by declaring that, "The cause of this behavior was not economic, it was not racial, and it was not political. [...] The only difference between these groups consists in what they believe about God."<sup>3</sup> He has, by process of elimination, isolated religion as the only substantive cause of the riots. For all intents and purposes, he presents it as pure and uncomplicated evidence in favor of the New Atheist thesis. And, indeed, if we constrain ourselves to Harris' account of the Gujarat riots, the causes may well seem just that simple.

Curiously, we need only look at Harris' own sources in order to draw that causal purity into question. The first is a report by journalist Celia W. Dugger entitled, suggestively enough, "Religious Riots Loom Over Indian Politics."<sup>4</sup> The article itself is relatively short, yet there is much material germane to the question of the role played by religion, the most salient of which nevertheless does not appear in Harris' retelling. He does not mention, for example, Dugger's reference to the role of Gujarat's dominant political force, the Bharatiya Janata Party, in "exploiting religious divisions to reap Hindu votes," nor does he reprint the quote attributed to a "senior

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<sup>3</sup> *TEoF*, 27

<sup>4</sup> *New York Times*, July 27, 2002.

police official” to the effect that, “It was a state-sponsored pogrom.” That certainly casts doubt on Harris’ assertion that the cause “was not political.”

His second citation is to “The Other Face of Fanaticism,” a longer article by novelist and essayist Pankaj Mishra.<sup>5</sup> Early on, Mishra says of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, of which the B.J.P. is the political wing, that its “resemblance to the European Fascist movements of the 1930’s has never been less than clear.” The second chief of the R.S.S., he notes, had cited Nazi racial pride as an example that Hindus could “profit” by. What, then, are we to make of Harris’ confidence in ruling the racial motive out of court when Mishra’s article makes it clear that R.S.S. and B.J.P. rhetoric presents its nationalistic platform, and Hindu identity in general, in specifically racial terms?

Likewise, the article suggests, *contra* Harris, an economic component to the Gujarat violence. In it, B.J. Bhole, a political scientist at Nagpur University, explains that, “The united Hindu nation they keep talking about is one where basically low-caste Hindus and Muslims and Christians don’t complain much while accepting the dominance of a Brahmin minority. The R.S.S. has been most successful in Gujarat, where low-caste Hindus and tribals were indoctrinated at the kind of schools you went to. They were in the mobs led by upper-caste Hindu nationalists that attacked Muslims and Christians.” If Bhole’s analysis is correct, the B.J.P.’s success in stirring up violence in Gujarat, as well as its success in the subsequent elections, was built on the exploitation of economic and caste differences.

We can thus say with some confidence that there were, after all, economic, racial and political components to the Gujarat riots. I can see no way to make the argument that Harris was simply ignorant of the role played by those components, since the evidence for them is easily found in the very sources he cites. That he has chosen not merely to ignore them, but to explicitly deny them, suggests a willingness to allow historical inquiry to be shaped by a desired conclusion. At the very least, a fuller consideration of the evidence forces us to admit that the episode was driven by a more complex array of forces than Harris’ account lets on.

When Harris does employ direct quotations from the sources he cites, his preference is for the lurid over the enlightening. The original article was comprised of around fifty paragraphs; from this, Harris chose to quote only the one describing the violent excesses of the riots. He dwells, in particular, on reports that pregnant women were disemboweled and the fetuses impaled. The purpose of this quotation, it seems, is to cast the episode in terms of a particular perception of the Middle Ages, to tie Gujarat, that is, to a broader conception of the role of religion in historical violence. A reader,

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<sup>5</sup> *New York Times Magazine*, Feb. 2, 2003, pp. 42-46.

then, who mistakes Harris' account as a plain, agenda-free recounting of the Gujarat violence, will likely come away with a visceral sense of revulsion, without ever having encountered the first word about the B.J.P or R.S.S. It is characteristic of the worst abuses of historical example that they substitute straightforward appeal to emotion for information that risks giving the reader a broader view of the complications to which actual history is prone.

To religion, economics, race and politics we may add a fifth component: historical consciousness. Its outlines may already be discerned in Mishra's account. We can supplement those suggestions with one of the first detailed investigations into the Gujarat riots, "'We Have No Orders to Save You': State Participation and Complicity In Communal Violence."<sup>6</sup> There we see the allegation of state complicity substantiated and expanded upon: in contradiction to their vocation, Gujarat police and security forces were ordered to stand idly by, refusing to help the victims of mob violence. Moreover, it presents the claim that, far from being the "spontaneous reaction" depicted in the official version of events, the attacks were planned well in advance, "and in close cooperation with officials of the Bharatiya Janata Party [...] state government."

Of particular value to our inquiry is section VI of the report, "The Context of the Violence in Gujarat." There we learn that, since its founding in 1925, the R.S.S. has

propagated a militant form of Hindu nationalism which it promotes as the sole basis for national identity in India. [...] Western thought and civilization are perceived as enemies of Hindu culture. Religions such as Islam and Christianity are depicted as alien to India, as they are seen as the religions of foreign invaders—the Mughals and the British.

That last clause points to the importance of historical consciousness in the development of the notion of *Hindutva*, or Hindu national identity, so important to the R.S.S. The sangh parivar, representing the full family of Hindu nationalist groups started by members of the R.S.S., teaches a particular interpretation of Indian history. If we are to understand the role played by that interpretation in the Hindutva movement, we must bear in mind that India had long been the subject of imperial powers from without. It was during the reign of the Mughal Empire (1526-1858) that Islam took hold in Gujarat. The Mughals were followed by the British Empire

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<sup>6</sup> *Human Rights Watch*, Vol. 14, No. 3(C), April 2002.

(1858-1947), who introduced Christianity, and when India finally gained its independence in 1947, there were many nationalistic groups who saw the colonial periods as an intolerable interruption of national self-determination.

We see this also reflected in the particulars of a previous outbreak of violence in Gujarat. As described by Mishra, the immediate issue that precipitated that violence was the B.J.P. campaign to replace a mosque in the town of Ayodhya with a temple commemorating the birthplace of the Hindu god Rama. On the surface of it, that may seem an explicitly religious conflict. Dennett lists it alongside ethnic cleansing in Kosovo and the Taliban's destruction of the Bamyān statues of Buddha in 2001 as one "of the saddest spectacles of the last century," in which "zealots of all faiths have defiled their own shrines and holy places, and brought shame and dishonor to their causes, by their acts of fanatical loyalty."<sup>7</sup> It does not seem to have occurred to him that such episodes might instead indicate a division of loyalties, between religious principles and political goals. Mishra, by contrast, hints at the political exhortations that drove the Ayodhya violence. "Hindu nationalists," he writes, "have long claimed that the mosque that stood over the site was built in the 16<sup>th</sup> century by the first Mogul emperor, Babur, as an act of contempt toward Hinduism. The mosque was a symbol of slavery and shame, B.J.P. leaders declared, and removing it and building a grand temple in its place was a point of honor for all Hindus." If the question, as Dennett so often asks, is *Cui bono*? then it can hardly be insignificant that the historical discourse that drove the cycle of attack and retaliation was spoken by those whose political interests would be served by it, namely "nationalists" and the B.J.P. Resistance to "foreign" religions becomes, in the Hindutva movement, a means of redressing India's historical loss of control over its own political and cultural destiny.

It would be difficult to overstate the import of that historical perspective with regards to the Hindutva movement. Certainly it has played a significant role in shaping the sangh parivar's notion of Hindu identity, and through that sense of identity, its political ambitions. For the sangh parivar, nationalist self-determination means organizing around an authentically Indian identity, and since the Mughal and British Empires were foreign invasions, nothing associated with them can be regarded as authentically Indian. We can declare the Hindu-Muslim violence in Gujarat a strictly religious conflict only by ignoring the way in which the Hindutva historical perspective imbues those nominally religious identities with political and racial meaning. When a pioneer of the sangh parivar like Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar (1906-1973) writes about Muslims and Christians as "invaders," it is safe to assume that he is less interested in the theological differences

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<sup>7</sup> *BtS*, 256

they have with Hindus than he is in the historical and political connotations. That politics of identity helps to explain how it was that Nathuram Godse, an R.S.S. activist, could justify to himself and other Hindutva advocates the assassination of a prominent Hindu like Mohandas Gandhi. The concessions Gandhi seemed ready to make with Pakistan threatened the hope of restoring chthonic responsibility for the destiny of the subcontinent to something approaching its pre-Mughal zenith.

I have given that all too summary background on the historical consciousness underlying the Hindutva movement in part to indicate the way that a given historical narrative can be put to political use. As a prelude to our forthcoming inquiry into the affirmative elements of the New Atheist treatment of history, it is here worth noting how Harris develops the Gujarat example. Because *The End of Faith* never strays far from the apocalyptic motif, the example is rapidly, and perhaps mystifyingly, generalized. Within the same paragraph, Harris writes, "A nuclear war between India and Pakistan seems almost inevitable, given what most Indians and Pakistanis believe about the afterlife."<sup>8</sup> Three constant themes of Harris' variety of New Atheism are here given concrete form. The implicit sweeping away of all of the practical, political and historical concerns that have contributed to the fractured relations that prevail between the two states is the most immediate to our current analysis. Second is the association between religious belief and nuclear practice, a topic that will need to be revived in later essays. But it is the third, the chord struck by the word "inevitable," that sounds most clearly in the New Atheist treatment of history.

Bearing in mind this comparison of Harris' account of the Gujarat riots with the account we find both in his sources and in readily available secondary sources, go back to the list with which he began his account. If we are not to avoid our responsibility to an intellectually honest inquiry, then we are compelled to ask in each case whether or not the pairs of religious groups presented in each set of parentheses deliberately masks a more complex array of factors, be they economic, ethnic, historical, political or some combination thereof. It may be easiest to start with those "cases in point" that Harris feels compelled to qualify with the proper names of national and ethnic groups, e.g. "Orthodox Serbians v. Catholic Croations; Orthodox Serbians v. Bosnian and Albanian Muslims." Is there not some tacit acknowledgment there that the causes of those conflict are more complex than their religious dimensions alone? Harris insists that, "In these places religion has been the *explicit* cause," but his assurance in the case of Gujarat has given us ample cause for doubt.

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<sup>8</sup> *TEoF*, 27

Even in the instances with no such qualifying adjectives, a closer look is warranted. For example, in Nigeria (“Muslims v. Christian,” you might recall) an artificial distinction between “indigene” and “settler” is ingrained in the political system, and is used to restrict resources and deny political representation to Nigerians not regarded as indigenous. Among at least two of the recognized groups in the region, religious affiliation tends to parallel ethnic division. Muslim and Christian are categories far more familiar to Western readers than Igbo, Hausa-Fulani, and Yoruba, so the religious identification often serves as a journalistic short-hand for divisions that have as much to do with ethnic and political distinctions as they do with doctrinal differences. And because farming remains a primary form of livelihood in Nigeria, the stakes are high for those citizens who, branded as “settlers,” are denied access to land. In light of those circumstances, the violence that has lately afflicted Nigeria becomes somewhat understandable, if no less repellant, but Harris’ bare presentation gives us no inkling of them.

At times Harris is content to let bare correlation stand in the place of a deeper inquiry into historical causes. “The Holocaust is relevant here,” he insists, “because it is generally considered to have been an entirely secular phenomenon. It was not. The anti-Semitism that built the crematoria brick by brick – and that still thrives today – comes to us by way of Christian theology. Knowingly or not, the Nazis were agents of religion.”<sup>9</sup> The gist of his argument is that the long Christian resentment of the role traditionally ascribed to Jews in the trial and execution of Christ was directly inherited by the proponents of National Socialism. Without delving too deeply in what is an immensely complex subject, suffice it to suggest that Harris’ interpretation raises difficulties of its own. For example, if anti-Semitism was the direct inheritance of Christian religious prejudice, why did it take so unprecedentedly virulent a form in the hands of the Nazis? Pogroms were a too common facet of medieval history, but for nearly 2,000 years, begrudging toleration and sometimes even integration was the norm rather than the exception. At the very least, the extent of the Holocaust requires an additional explanatory principle. But here is by no means any guarantee that straightforward inheritance of an ancient religious prejudice explains even the origin of modern anti-Semitism. Political theorist and German ex-patriot Hannah Arendt, for example, has argued that anti-Semitism represents a distinctly modern reaction to the rise of an economically mobile and politically stagnant middle class of secular ethnic Jews.<sup>10</sup> Acceptance of her analysis does not wholly exonerate European Christendom since its

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<sup>9</sup> TEoF, 79

<sup>10</sup> *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Vol. 1, *Antisemitism*, (Schocken:1951)



ambivalence towards the Jews may still be credited with fostering the conditions, such as the Jewish ghetto, that lead to the emergence of the secular, ethnically Jewish bourgeois, but Harris' claim of a direct causal relationship between Christian religion and Nazi atrocity becomes untenable. The roots of Nazism are more accurately located in the modern and largely secular emergence of racial and nationalistic ideologies, which would no doubt be plain to Harris were he not already committed to the premise that religion "remains among the principle causes of armed conflict in our world."<sup>11</sup>

In his view, it likewise explains the creation of, and continuing Western support for, modern Israel. Thus, "For many years U.S. policy in the Middle East has been shaped, at least in part, by the interests that fundamentalist Christians have" in Zionism's purported capacity to "usher in both the Second Coming of Christ and the final destruction of the Jews." While it may certainly be true that some fundamentalist Christians support Israel for those reasons, that does not necessarily mean, as Harris suggests that it does, that U.S. policy in the Middle East has been shaped by those concerns. "Such smiling anticipations of genocide," as he would have it, "seem to have presided over the Jewish state from its first moments: the first international support for the Jewish return to Palestine, Britain's Balfour Declaration of 1917, was inspired, at least in part, by a conscious conformity to biblical prophecy."<sup>12</sup>

While it is true that two or three of the British politicians who lent their support to the Balfour declaration linked Zionist aims to Christian eschatology, the primary motivation for the Balfour Declaration was strategic, not religious. It was supposed that a friendly (or better: indebted) state in the Middle East would serve both as a buffer against Russian imperialism, as well as provide material support for British interests in the region. Far more operative than the religious beliefs of a David Lloyd George was the secular belief in the economic and political influence of international Jewry, the same sort of belief that presumably leads a rationalist like Dawkins to assert without citation that Jews "are notoriously one of the most effective political lobbies in the United States."<sup>13</sup> The simplest and most compelling explanation for both the Balfour Declaration and continuing U.S. support of Israel remains simply that Western powers

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<sup>11</sup> *TEoF*, 77

<sup>12</sup> *TEoF*, 153

<sup>13</sup> *TGD*, 27

derive a great deal of value from a strong but dependent ally in one of the most strategically and economically important regions on the planet.<sup>14</sup>



To spare the reader the tedium of being led through a similar exploration of each conflict named by Harris, those cases will have to stand as representative. I will not, I hope, risk losing the reader's trust by suggesting that such oversimplifications are a consistent feature of his use of historical example. Nor do we always find the New Atheists drawing a clear line between unintentional misrepresentation and the deliberate imposition of a biased interpretation on an unbiased account. To that end, we find, in the thirteenth chapter of *God Is Not Great*, a similar inquiry into the role played by religion in another recent historical conflict. The chapter is titled "Does Religion Make People Behave?" – though it is not clear how (or even if) Hitchens expects his examples to address that question. Near the end of the chapter he announces, "An even more graphic example is afforded by the case of Rwanda, which in 1992 gave the world a new synonym for genocide and sadism."<sup>15</sup> A more graphic example of what, precisely, is not entirely clear from the context. Perhaps he means an example of religion failing to make people behave? Or perhaps he means, based on the preceding passages, a more graphic example of the damage done by true believers? Because the point is left so vague, it can be difficult to choose which intimation to address. This perhaps gives Hitchens' discussion of Rwanda the illusion of having demonstrated a point, without the inconvenience of actually having to do so.

Nevertheless, after a summary account of the role played by several religious figures, Hitchens declares that, "At a minimum, this makes it impossible to argue that religion causes people to behave in a more kindly or civilized manner."<sup>16</sup> At first blush he may seem to have established an effective refutation, but a refutation of what, and whom by? Has the Rwandan evidence been invoked to refute the argument that religion will compel *all* adherents to behave? I suspect that very few apologists would make so sweeping a claim in the first place. Were any foolish enough to do so, we have venerable answers like Torquemada already well established

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. esp. *A Peace to End All Peace: The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East*, David Fromkin (Henry Holt and Company:1989)

<sup>15</sup> *GING*, 190

<sup>16</sup> *GING*, 192

and hardly need the testimony of an Agathe Habyarimana or Father Munyeshyaka to laugh the suggestion out of consideration.

The critical reader of *God Is Not Great* may at least take solace in the fact that Hitchens has been relatively specific about his source for much of the material in his discussion of Rwanda – a rarity for the author, who provides, far and away, the most sparse citations of any of the Four Horsemen. Knowing that the material is at least supposed to derive “primarily” from Philip Gourevitch’s harrowing *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families*<sup>17</sup> allows, if nothing else, a basis for comparison. The literature on the 1994 Rwandan genocides has grown steadily since the publication of Gourevitch’s book, and we could, if we were so inclined, draw from a broader range of works in attempting to assess Hitchens’ interpretation, but for the moment we may content ourselves with examining what Hitchens has claimed on the basis of *We Wish to Inform You*, in light of what we find there ourselves.

Hitchens’ account may be roughly divided into two parts. The first suggests the role religion played in setting the stage for genocide. Though the distinction is not entirely clear in *God Is Not Great*, his evidence concerns two separate charismatic movements that attracted some attention in the decade prior to the outbreak of violence. The first is the movement surrounding “Little Pebbles,” a Catholic visionary who in 1987 predicted the apocalyptic return of Jesus. The second is a more influential series of visions, witnessed on a hill near Kibeho and attributed to the Virgin Mary, the most startling of which predicted bloodshed. That these two episodes make up nearly half of Hitchens’ discussion on Rwanda should not mislead the reader into supposing that there is clear evidence of their role in motivating the violence to come. Yet Hitchens transitions to the violence itself by writing, “When the apocalyptic year of 1994 actually hit, and the premeditated and coordinated massacres began, many frightened Tutsi and dissident Hutu were unwise enough to try and take refuge in churches”<sup>18</sup>, as though the association between prophecy and policy should have been clear to the population at large.

When we turn to Gourevitch’s account,<sup>19</sup> we find little evidence in favor of the idea that these movements contributed greatly to the onset of violence. They are practically asides in Gourevitch’s book, taking up hardly any more space there than they do in Hitchens much more abbreviated account of Rwanda. Even their association, which nevertheless remains rather confused in Hitchens’ account, is highly uncertain. Hitchens’

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<sup>17</sup> Picador: 1998

<sup>18</sup> *GING* 191

<sup>19</sup> Gourevitch, 78-79

implication seems to be that Agathe Habyarimana, whose husband was president at the beginning of the genocide, and whose clan was one of the driving forces behind the violence, was in part motivated by her attraction to these movements. Gourevitch is less sanguine about the association between Little Pebbles and *Le clan de Madame*: "I can't say that Habyarimana ever read this forecast, only that it found its way into his household, and that it was close in spirit to the views that fascinated his powerful wife."

If, in fact, the evidential basis for the claim that Lady Habyarimana was a devotee of Little Pebbles derives from *We Wish to Inform You*, it is slender indeed, since Gourevitch himself claims nothing more than that a photocopy of Little Pebbles' prophecy was given to him by a United Nations press officer who found it in the ruins of the Habyarimana estate. At any rate, by 1994, when Hutu Power made its move, time had already invalidated the prophecies of Little Pebbles, which held that total nuclear war would catalyze the return of Christ on Easter Sunday of 1992. The evidence in favor of Lady Habyarimana's association with the Marian visions at Kibeho proves more conclusive, but it remains to be proven whether her clan's role in the genocides was a product of her religious convictions, or whether, as seems more likely, the Kibeho visions were attractive to Habyarimana in part because they forecasted just the sort of violence she already anticipated.

Why then do the Little Pebbles and Kihebo episodes warrant even a mention in so compressed an account as that which appears in *God Is Not Great*? One (perhaps ungenerous) answer is that, coupled with the absence of any other inquiry into the factors leading up to the genocides, they allow the reader to infer that religion played a greater role in motivating the violence than the rest of Grouetvitch's book would suggest. Reading Hitchens' chapter, one could easily come away with the impression that the Rwandan genocides were inspired by religious epiphany and organized primarily by Catholic clergy. He makes no mention of the "similar but less extensive massacres in the early 1960s"<sup>20</sup>; of *Opération Turquoise*, the French military operation that aided the Hutu *interahamwe* in routing Tutsi resistance; or UNAMIR, the U.N. peacekeeping mission that lulled many Tutsi into a false sense of security. Nor does *God Is Not Great* consider the role of Radio Television Libres des Mille Collines and other media outlets that were used to coordinate the violence, and which presaged the failure, if not downright complicity, of Western media and aid organizations in misrepresenting the Hutu exodus that followed. Absent as well is the condemnation that, when not focusing his ire on religion, Hitchens would normally heap on the hesitance of Western governments to frame the

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<sup>20</sup> Gourevitch, 16

massacres in terms that would justify to the international community any suggestion of intervention. His account, in fact, barely resembles the summary given in *We Wish to Inform You*. “Consider all the factors”, writes Gourevitch:

the precolonial inequalities; the fanatically thorough and hierarchical centralized administration; the Hamitic myth and the radical polarization under Belgian rule; the killings and expulsions that began with the Hutu revolution of 1959; the economic collapse of the late 1980s; Habyarimana’s refusal to let the Tutsi refugees return; the multiparty confusion; the RPF attack; the war; the extremism of Hutu Power; the propaganda; the practice massacres; the massive importation of arms; the threat to the Habyarimana oligarchy posed by peace through power sharing and integration; the extreme poverty, ignorance, superstition, and fear of a cowed, compliant cramped – and largely alcoholic – peasantry; the indifference of the outside world.<sup>21</sup>

Here the role of religion is, at most, hinted at in words like “fanatically”, “myth”, and “superstition”, but they must be interpreted heavily and given disproportionate emphasis to take on the importance they bear in Hitchens’ account. The curious part played by certain clergymen and women in the Rwandan genocide is a thread woven into the length of Gourevitch’s narrative, but at no point does he treat it as formative. Hutu Power, not the Church, drove the massacres.

If we are feeling ungracious, we may suppose that Hitchens’ decision to employ Rwanda as an object lesson was informed by the rhetorical opportunity presented by the country’s religious demography. At one point he attempts to build a correlation by claiming that, “the chances that a person committing the crimes was ‘faith-based’ was almost 100 percent, while the chances that a person of faith was on the side of humanity and decency were about as good as the odds of a coin flip.”<sup>22</sup> Statistically, it is only to be expected that, in purportedly the “most Christian country in Africa,”<sup>23</sup> a significant proportion of the crimes committed there will be attributable to religious believers. It should likewise come as no surprise that, when massacres have taken place in regions with larger secular populations, such as Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, the perpetrators

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<sup>21</sup> Gourevitch, 180

<sup>22</sup> *GING*, 192

<sup>23</sup> *GING*, 190

have generally been less consistently religious. It cuts to the heart of the matter to insist, rather, that those involved in the Rwandan massacres were much more likely to be convinced of the artificial and politically charged distinction between Hutu and Tutsi than they were of, say, the benevolence of God or the efficacy of the sacraments.

The remainder of Hitchens' account concentrates on the figures of more orthodox religious authorities who, their supposed moral authority notwithstanding, have been credibly accused with facilitating, if not directly participating in, the massacres. The first of these is Monsignor Vincent Nsengiyumva, Bishop of the Rwandan capital city Kigali and a member of the central committee of the now outlawed National Republican Movement for Democracy and Development, which furnished so many of the architects of the genocide; second is Father Wenceslas Munyeshyaka of the Cathedral of Saint Famille; the last is Bishop Augustin Misago of Gikongoro in the southwestern corner of the country. In June of 2000 (a full seven years before the publication of *God Is Not Great*), a Rwandan court acquitted Misago of charges of complicity in the genocides. Munyeshyaka was convicted *in absentia*; French authorities arrested him in 2007, and in 2008 announced their intention to conduct their own trial of the accused. Tutsi rebels killed Nsengiyumva in the July of 1994, holding him responsible for the deaths of family members; whether or not the accusation against him in that particular case would have held up under closer scrutiny, his part in the politics that gave rise to the genocide is well attested in the historical record.

For at least two of the three, then, I see no point in disputing the charge of complicity. Granting that quorum, we can at least admit the pertinence of Rwanda to the question at hand. Yet, when viewed in something closer to its full historical detail, the example proves, in some regards, as complex as that of the 1992 Gujarat riots. To treat that complexity with the seriousness it deserves makes it exceedingly difficult to draw any simple and clear cut conclusions. As it stands, Hitchens manages to convey a general sense of condemnation, but loses the more precise critique in anti-climax.

He does so in part by tidily omitting the heroic counterparts to the Munyeshyakas of the genocide, men like Father Dhelo, superior of a monastery in Mokoto Zaire who, when confronted with hundreds of refugees fleeing from Rwanda, "did not hesitate to take them in."<sup>24</sup> The decision was taken at great risk since Father Dhelo "knew that in 1994 the *génocidaires* had not hesitated to violate the sanctuary of churches in Rwanda"<sup>25</sup> and that their Zairean allies were now working to create a Hutu

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<sup>24</sup> Gourevitch, 277

<sup>25</sup> Gourevitch, 278

Power base in his own country. Father Dhelo refused to turn over the refugees in his care even when threatened with death, and the *génocidaires* were forced to postpone their attack on the camp until Father Dhelo was away on business several months later.

It would be all of a piece with his treatment of prior examples to assume that Hitchens would dismiss a counter-example like Father Dhelo by denying that his religion had anything to do with his heroism, much as he has argued that Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. struggled against segregation in spite of his religion, rather than in concert with it.<sup>26</sup> As it stands, Hitchens himself makes no argument whatsoever, since the Father Dhelo story is left entirely out of account. He has, instead, constructed a very narrow historical narrative, not only by choosing to include certain marginal details, like Little Pebbles, over other details that are arguably more germane, like Father Dhelo, but also by glossing over the central themes of the source from which he draws those details.



Nor are the New Atheist more reliable regarding the more remote events of religious history. At the beginning of a consideration of monotheism, Dawkins writes that, “During the Roman occupation of Palestine, Christianity was founded by Paul of Tarsus as a less ruthlessly montheistic sect of Judaism and a less exclusive one, which looked outwards from the Jews to the rest of the world.”<sup>27</sup> Dawkins does not mention that the hypothesis, that Paul founded Christianity *ad initio*, is a controversial one. Many of its partisans seem to prefer it mostly because it implicitly denies that the church originated with Jesus, whom Christians name as the founder of the religion. Assuming that Paul was the sole founder mitigates the need for supposing that there were any Christians, or even a Christ, prior to Paul. Here Dawkins hedges his bets, suggesting that it is “possible to mount a serious, though not widely supported historical case that Jesus never lived at all,” but nevertheless averring that “Jesus probably existed.”<sup>28</sup> On what evidence, then, does Dawkins attribute the founding of the religion to Paul? Certainly not on Paul’s own testimony, since he attests to the widespread existence of Christian churches prior to his own conversion.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> See “A Drawing of Lines” for more on King Jr.

<sup>27</sup> *TGD*, 58

<sup>28</sup> *TGD*, 122

<sup>29</sup> Galatians 1:13-23

So far as Dawkins is concerned, Christianity was “spread by the sword, wielded first by Roman hands after the Emperor Constantine raised it from eccentric cult to official religion, then by the Crusaders, and later by the *conquistadores* and other European invaders and colonists, with missionary accompaniment.”<sup>30</sup> That he can so easily condense 2,000 years of complex history to a single sentence ought to indicate the two-dimensionality of such a view. Yet some such version of events is almost *de rigueur* for New Atheist accounts of the spread of religion. An even cursory examination of the history of early Christianity reveals that its earliest gains were made not by the sword, but in spite of it. The Christianity inherited by Constantine was already popular and widespread, and much of what the New Atheists cite as the installation of Christianity as the official religion of Rome was, in fact, the repeal of laws hostile to the still young religion. The exaggerated importance of Constantine’s elevation of Christianity above its prior persecution may be the legacy of a document known as the Donation of Constantine, by which Constantine purportedly transferred authority over Rome to Pope Sylvester I. It has been known since at least the 15<sup>th</sup> century that the Donation was a forgery, but the legend of Constantine’s declaration of a Christian Rome has persisted nonetheless. In fact, Roman paganism remained so potent a political force in the Empire even after Constantine’s repeal that the Emperor gave Rome over to the largely pagan Senate in order to establish a second capital at Constantinople. So tenuous was Christianity’s hold in the following decades that, had he not died in battle attempting to push back the Sassanid Empire from the Empire’s Persian borders, the Emperor Julian (called the Apostate) might have succeeded in extirpating Christianity and reestablishing paganism as the official religion of the Empire. The leap from Constantine to the Crusades leaves out of account no less than seven centuries, during which Christianity made some of its most significant gains on the strength of evangelism. The ironic precedent that made the Crusades possible was the Peace and Truce of God, a Christian movement that sought to curb the violent excesses of the martial classes of feudal society through non-violent means.

Harris concludes a section on the use of judicial torture during the European witch crazes by noting that, “The church did not officially condemn the use of torture until the bull of Pope Pius VII in 1816.”<sup>31</sup> That may be true, but in failing to mention that the use of judicial torture was itself a 12<sup>th</sup> century reversal of a long-standing opposition to torture, Harris tells less than half of the story. The era of judicial torture marks a particularly dark period of the history of Christianity, but it also represents

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<sup>30</sup> *TGD*, 58

<sup>31</sup> *TEoF*, 92



less than a third of that history, and not, as an uninformed reader of *The End of Faith* might suppose, all but the last two centuries of it.

A similar inference could be made by Harris' account of the beginnings of the intellectual resistance to the witch crazes. "After nearly four hundred years," he tells us, "some ecclesiastics began to appreciate how insane all this was."<sup>32</sup> After four hundred years of what, Harris does not quite specify. Ecclesiastical approval of the witch trials was by and large limited to the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the historical record shows that the clergy was divided over the issue from the very start. Harris' own example of an ecclesiastical dissenter, Frederick Spee, died in 1635, so if we are to believe that represents the end of four centuries of doctrinal credulity, then we ought also to settle on the 13<sup>th</sup> century as the beginning of the witch crazes. There is, however, no evidence to support that. As Hugh Trevor-Roper<sup>33</sup> explains, throughout most of the medieval period it was the official policy of the church that belief in witchcraft violated Catholic doctrine. That circumstance did not change until the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century when Pope Innocent VIII issued a bull, *Summis Desiderantes Affectibus*, authorizing the Dominicans to halt the spread of witchcraft in Germany. All signs of the millennium and a half in which the church lent its weight against the recurrent popular belief in witchcraft is lost somewhere between the lines of Harris' account. "Four centuries" out of the twenty so far allotted to Christianity are presented as indicative of the dangers of religion, and the Medieval and Renaissance periods are conflated even though the witch-crazes themselves were almost wholly restricted to the Enlightenment.

Perhaps a sympathetic reader could partially excuse these lapses, since, in contrast to that of the Gujarat example, Harris' sources in this case seem to have provided him with little evidence of the real complexity of the topic. Trevor-Roper stands at the beginning of a minor revolution in historical inquiries into witch-crazes on either side of the Atlantic, and an investigator with no access to later twentieth century historians like John Demos, Robin Briggs, or Frances Hill would be forced to choose primarily between highly partisan accounts, many of them afflicted by an anti-Catholic bias. Harris, for example, quotes Bertrand Russell's *Religion and Science*<sup>34</sup> on the dangers that faced skeptics of witch belief and Charles McCay's *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*<sup>35</sup> for an example of the distortion of reason caused by belief in the supernatural.

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<sup>32</sup> *TEoF*, 90

<sup>33</sup> *The European Witch-Crazes of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, 1969

<sup>34</sup> 1935

<sup>35</sup> 1841!

True, he also draws material from Robin Briggs' much more modern *Witches and Neighbors*,<sup>36</sup> but only to present a single anecdote as "typical."<sup>37</sup> In doing so, he quickly irons out the complexities that are the hard-earned achievement of Briggs' scholarship. Harris might better have described his choice of examples as "stereotypical."

A preference for sources that stand in confirmation of simple, biased perceptions of history manifests itself in much of New Atheist thought. Harris, for example, also cites Voltaire – not exactly a neutral authority – as a principle source on religious history. In fleshing out the Middle Ages, he makes use of William Manchester's *A World Lit Only by Fire*,<sup>38</sup> a modern book that not only reprises the clichés of 19<sup>th</sup> century historical chauvinism but also makes a number of glaring factual errors. Dawkins' cites the (no doubt unbiased) website religionisbullshit.net. All four of the Horsemen cite themselves and one another as sources, as well as authors, like Michael Shermer and Steven Pinker, whom have since served on the Project Reason advisory board. It is not always clear whether or not a New Atheist citation to a biased or discredited source should be chalked up to a mere overzealous adherence to a shaky premise rather, or to simple source credulity.

As with their presentation of historical events in the modern era, the New Atheist accounts of the written history of religious traditions tends to be highly selective in concert with an interpretation of the meaning of those traditions. Not one of the six books by the Four Horsemen so much as mentions the Peace and Truce of God. We find few mentions of liberation theology, an important modern movement that interprets Christian theology in terms of the historical and international human rights struggle; the most direct are in *God Is Not Good*, and serve only to connect this "bizarre mutation"<sup>39</sup> to Cuban socialism and to Japan's membership in the Nazi/Fascist axis of World War II.<sup>40</sup> Their marginalization of those two isolated examples cannot, of course, count as an indictment, as though failure to devote sufficient attention to liberation theology or the Peace and Truce of God were sufficient to discredit their opinion. They merely represent the omission of an entire category of relevant evidence. Any event in which religious institutions contribute to the well-being of society, anything that might suggest that religion has the welfare of people in mind, or that religious institutions are limited in their ability even where they might wish to change the circumstances of history – in short, anything that might serve

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<sup>36</sup> Harper Collins:1996

<sup>37</sup> *TEoF*, 88

<sup>38</sup> Little, Brown & Co:1992

<sup>39</sup> *GING*, 247

<sup>40</sup> *GING*, 203

as counterpoint to the thesis that religion is inherently poisonous – gets left out of account. But scrupulous inattention to the exceptions marks only the beginning.



Because it so rarely deals with the same spans of history, Dennett's *Breaking the Spell* may seem, at first blush, exempt from this sort of scrutiny. There are minor infractions, but even where he errs on the modern era, the points he establishes thereby are mostly ancillary. In fact, though he was initially spoken of as a New Atheist along with the other Horsemen, later commentators have gradually taken to omitting Dennett's name from the roll, and (for more precise reasons) we might have done the same except for his inquiry into the origins of religion. His treatment of that subject not only proves consonant with the New Atheist treatment of the recorded history of religion; it improves upon it by making indifference to human welfare a critical explanatory feature.

Some account of the origin of the phenomenon of religion appears in each of the New Atheist accounts; Dennett presents only the most involved. Harris tends to represent it mostly in asides, or in the words that he chooses to characterize early religious belief, as when he writes, "Occult beliefs of this sort are clearly an inheritance from our primitive, magic-minded ancestors."<sup>41</sup> Hitchens supposes that, "if we watch the process of religion in its formation, we can make some assumptions about the origins of those religions that were put together before most people could read."<sup>42</sup> Modern anthropology has long since repudiated that premise, yet three of the four authors reprise that fallacy by inquiring into Cargo Cults as though it were clear that the same conclusions would apply in the case of much more ancient religious traditions. Dawkins' account of the general history of religion bears a marked resemblance to Dennett's. Each of the accounts given by all four authors entails some version of the genetic fallacy, whereby the origin of a thing is taken to discredit the thing itself. Dennett's account elevates that fallacy to an explanatory model.

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<sup>41</sup> *TEoF*, 89

<sup>42</sup> *GING*, 155

Perhaps because they have both built careers out of evangelizing broad interpretations of the importance of evolutionary theory,<sup>43</sup> Dennett and Dawkins seem to have felt obliged to address the suggestion that religion is, in some way or another, useful, perhaps even essential, to human existence. The premise that natural selection ruthlessly weeds out inutile adaptations requires them to account for the relatively long survival of religion in the face of pressures that ought, if religion truly is an impediment, to have made short work of it. Without supposing that it was wholly motivated by the demands of maintaining both positions – that is, both the validity of evolutionary theory *and* the ultimate disposability of religion – we may nonetheless note that it would be difficult to avoid bringing them into logical contradiction without something like the strategy they adopt. The premise they both present is that religion arises as a byproduct of human traits that are robust enough to withstand pressures that might otherwise naturally select against a tendency as evolutionarily “expensive” as religion.<sup>44</sup>

On the face of it, Dennett seems fully prepared to conform to the demands of a rigorous scientific inquiry. “The spell that I say *must* be broken,” he declares, “is the taboo against a forthright, scientific, no-holds-barred investigation of religion as one natural phenomenon among many.”<sup>45</sup> By that, he seems to mean specifically the sort of functionalist explanations preferred by evolutionary biologists. Briefly put, “A social historian or an anthropologist who knows a great deal about the beliefs and practices of people all around the world but is naïve about evolution is equally unlikely to frame the issues well.”<sup>46</sup> That interpretation would, on the whole, square with his reputation as the foremost advocate of a Universal Darwinism, the view that Darwin’s theory of evolution represents an algorithm that can be applied in fields far removed from their original, biological context. The middle third of the book is given over to telling “*the best current version of the story science can tell about how religions have become what they are.*”<sup>47</sup> But even that, he insists, is only an exploratory foray. Throughout the early chapters of *Breaking the Spell* he insists that the intent of his argument is to pave the way for more rigorous inquiry than has been conducted so far.

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<sup>43</sup> cf. eg. Dennett’s *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life* (Simon & Schuster: 1995). Evolution is central to Dawkins’ entire bibliography, but starting with *The Blind Watchmaker* he has tended more towards a Dennett-esque emphasis on Universal Darwinism.

<sup>44</sup> *TGD*, chapter 5

<sup>45</sup> *BtS*, 17

<sup>46</sup> *BtS*, 104

<sup>47</sup> *BtS*, 103

Only on the other side of a rigorous process of testing the hypotheses that presume to explain religion should we draw any hard and fast conclusions.

We need not here evaluate the ultimate viability of religion-as-byproduct explanations. For the moment, it should suffice to note, first of all, that their adoption seems to prejudice the question of whether or not religion has any intrinsic value. In other words, the decision to focus exclusively on byproduct explanations suggests that both Dawkins and Dennett have already ruled out the possibility that religion pays for its own survival. Secondly, the task of maintaining some such explanation entails a heavy burden of proof.

In light of those two considerations, it is worth asking whether a scientist or philosopher who felt no vested interest in the moral value of religion – that is, an observer whose sole interest was in explaining the survival of religion – would stumble on Dennett's account as the most likely explanation for the survival of religion. Or would she discern the burden of proof entailed by such an account and set *Breaking the Spell* aside in order to consider some possibilities not burdened by its complications? In suggesting the latter, it should not be supposed that I would altogether rule out the sort of explanation offered by Dennett; a heuristic like Ockham's razor only directs us down the route of least complication so long as a simpler hypothesis can account for what we actually observe. If we can find no simpler hypotheses to account for the growth of religion, then the byproduct account becomes, by process of elimination, a better bet.

But concerning that aforementioned burden of proof: because evolutionary theory has, at least since its first stirrings in the mind of Darwin, flirted with economic metaphor, we may present it in terms of exchange. To justify the suggestion that religion has only resisted naturally selective pressures against it because it is a persistent byproduct of evolutionary advantageous traits, it is necessary to demonstrate that those traits are so robust that they can overcome the evolutionary debt incurred by their association with religion. Taking the analogy a step further, if it cannot be demonstrated that those traits generate enough capital to sustain that debt, then what reason do we have to suppose that religion survives only on the strength of that association?

In Dennett's account, the capital that sustains religion's debt is generated by our capacity for cognizing other things as agents. By seeing some other thing as an agent motivated by beliefs, desires and rationales, we are made capable of "adopting the intentional stance" which allows us to anticipate, to varying degrees of success, behavior that impacts our odds of surviving long enough to pass our genes on to another generation. The intentional stance allows species that are capable of adopting it to develop complex behaviors like hunting and, at higher orders of anticipation, intentional

lying. Such complex behaviors pay for their investment of time, effort and resources by allowing the agent to survive in increasingly complex circumstances.

So far, so good. On its own, the evolutionary/economic logic of agency detection seems to account for its own persistence over time, and it is in that capacity that Dennett refers to it as a “Good Trick.” But how good? It apparently generates enough capital to pay for its own persistence, but does it generate enough surplus to afford a few luxuries as well? Dennett’s account suggests that it does and, drawing on the research of Justin Barrett, he points to one way in which that capital is spent – namely, in the hypersensitive agent detection device. Dennett’s example is that of a dog that “leaps up and growls when some snow falls off the eaves with a thud that rouses him from his nap”.<sup>48</sup> To wit, the HADD may be described as a lack of rigor in our capacity for assigning agency, and the dog in the example may be described as “manifesting a ‘false positive’ orienting response triggered by his HADD.”

In Dennett’s account the earliest behaviors tending toward religion are a byproduct of false positives generated by our HADD, whereby we find it difficult to withdraw our attribution of agency to former agents.<sup>49</sup> Thus, when a person dies, we tend to continue to regard them as an agent with an active stake in our behavior. Our persistent attachment to the dead draws us into conflict with another advantageous psychological reflex, the instinctual repulsion to corpses that preserves us from the diseases that result from contact with putrefaction. “What seems to have evolved everywhere,” goes Dennett’s hypothesis,

is an elaborate ceremony that removes the dangerous body from the daily environment either by burial or burning, combined with the interpretation of the persistent firing of the intentional-stance habits shared by all who know the deceased as the unseen presence of the agent as a *spirit*, a sort of *virtual person* created by the survivors’ troubled mind-sets, and almost as vivid and robust as a live person.

That this explanation entails a number of economic complications seems to have given Dennett very little pause. For anyone hoping to maintain it, the first difficulty is that the HADD already imposes a debt on the Good Trick of agency detection. The dog that barks at anything that *might* be an agent runs the risk of attracting dangerous predators. The more it does so, the less likely it is to pass on its HADD to another generation, and so we ought to

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<sup>48</sup> *BtS*, 109

<sup>49</sup> *BtS*, 112-114

expect a species to maintain only as strong a habit for chasing after false positives as it is capable of paying for with the capital generated by the advantages of agency detection. How then do we account for the development of minds so eager to detect agency that they positively *must* evolve something like proto-religion to prevent them from running afoul of extinction by their inability to give up the dead? Presumably the evolutionary debt generated by the dog's tendency to bark at most anything is paid for by the times when its HADD gives it enough advance warning to avoid real threats to its life or capitalize on opportunities to reproduce. A more complex accounting is required to balance the ledger when the capital accrued through the advantages of agency detection must pay not only the debts of a hypersensitivity unmatched in most other species, but also of the incredibly expensive edifice of ritual purportedly evolved to keep us from unintentionally killing ourselves. And yet, funeral arrangements are a bargain in the grand scheme of things. As Dennett explains, "This still doesn't get our ancestors to religion, but it gets them to persistent – even obsessive – rehearsal and elaboration of some of their habits of thought."<sup>50</sup> By the time he gets to animism, that debt has grown exponentially. If we take his preceding discussion of the importance of evolutionary accounting seriously, then we cannot help but expect natural selection to have cut off at the stem such an expensive (and, therefore, unlikely) tendency to manifest false positives.

No doubt Dennett would argue that he means to set none of this in stone. Yet we find him in the process of building an edifice that needs a stone foundation. With each level he adds to that structure, the disjunction grows between the use to which Dennett puts his inquiry and occasional reminders like, "I am not at all claiming that this is what science has already established about religion."<sup>51</sup> Dawkins makes a similar disclaimer, but *The God Delusion's* comparatively abbreviated account of byproduct-oriented explanation adheres more closely to that spirit. It commits less, and remains more flexible. Even with an explanatory concept of his own design, like the *meme*, Dawkins seems reluctant to take any more definite stand than that religion is likely a byproduct rather than an adaptation. Dennett, on the other hand, seems unwilling to content himself with a mere placeholder. Mixed in with such elaborately intertwining conjecture, those disclaimers begin to resemble a case of protesting overmuch.

It is characteristic of his style to begin by suggesting an explanatory principle on the premise that it *might* prove fruitful; to then argue that his reader ought, in the spirit of mutual inquiry, grant that principle long enough

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<sup>50</sup> *BtS*, 114

<sup>51</sup> *BtS*, 103

to consider its implications; to use that principle as a foundation on which to build an elaborate explanation; and, finally, to draw conclusions from that structure of argument as though we could reasonably take it as established. Thus we are rapidly guided from unsubstantiated claim to unsubstantiated claim – from the suggestion that all intrinsic values begin as instrumental values,<sup>52</sup> to the introduction of memes as a cultural analogue of genetic replication,<sup>53</sup> standing in support of his insistence on *cui bono* reasoning as the final criteria for assessing the validity of an explanation,<sup>54</sup> to the assertion (introduced without preface and upheld without demonstration) that, “The first thing we have to understand about human minds as suitable homes for religion is how our minds understand *other* minds!”,<sup>55</sup> and so on and so forth. Does it really make sense to “sketch a *whole* story now” in order to “get something on the table that is both testable and worth testing?”<sup>56</sup> Or does it seem more likely that Dennett presents that story in its entirety because he would like to see it, or something very much like it, accepted wholesale by the reader? An incremental approach, in which discreet hypotheses are tested and the whole story assembled from the pieces that survive that process, would seem more rational.

It should be plain that the long chains of supposition preferred by Dennett square less with his caution that “we don’t want to waste time barking up the wrong trees” than it does with the clause that precedes it: “The form our questions take opens up some avenues and closes off others...”<sup>57</sup> From the apparently casual suggestion that HADD lies at the root of human religion, Dennett not only teases out an entire capsule history of the development of religion, but also takes the wholly unwarranted step of suggesting social and governmental policy on the basis of that structure of argument. It might well be asked what business a chapter like “Now What Do We Do” has in a book that purports to draw no conclusions on the value of religion. That crucial turn in the method of *Breaking the Spell* will be dealt with in more detail in the essay on “The Irreligious Right”; I bring it up now only to suggest that an account ceases to qualify as a simple thought experiment once the narrator sees fit to use it as the basis for policy.

For the moment, the intent is not even to show that Dennett’s account may be incorrect. Rather, the point to be considered is that he has employed a form of explanation (and, in doing so, borrowed the contemporary

<sup>52</sup> *BtS*, 69

<sup>53</sup> *BtS*, 81

<sup>54</sup> *BtS*, 82

<sup>55</sup> *BtS*, 108

<sup>56</sup> *BtS*, 103-104

<sup>57</sup> *BtS*, 19



prestige of evolutionary biology) in order to present the history of religion as a biological and psychological process. This, too, represents a flattening of historical perspective, though one that is perhaps less obvious than that which afflicts New Atheist accounts of written history. Already by the end of Chapter Five we begin to see the development of doctrine presented not as the result of the sort of debate and compromise we see in, for example, the canonization of the New Testament, but rather as the collation of statistical averages. Perhaps the apotheosis of the process Dennett has in mind is religion's purported "inclusion of *incomprehensible* elements,"<sup>58</sup> a "design feature" that would seem to stand in direct contradiction to his earlier claim that counterintuitive ideas "that aren't readily classifiable at all because they are *too* nonsensical can't hold their own in the competition for attention."<sup>59</sup> Nevertheless, Dennett posits that incomprehensible elements could help the transmission of a creed or ritual by forcing the participants "to fall back on 'direct quotation' in circumstances where they might otherwise be tempted to use 'indirect quotation' and just transmit the *gist* of the occasion 'in their own words' – a dangerous source of mutation."<sup>60</sup> Nothing may seem unreasonable about that suggestion so long as you adhere strictly to the *meme*'s-eye perspective that Dennett suggests as the only way to understand the development of religion, but there remains the question of explaining how a species pays for the evolutionary debt incurred by transmitting *memes* that are incomprehensible and presumably of no value to the species itself. Indeed, if you wanted to maintain the argument that some doctrinal or ritual elements of religion convey no meaning and have no instrumental purpose, it would be very much to your advantage to provide in advance an explanation for how those vestiges could survive.



To suppose that his historical account of religion has been overtly shaped in anticipation of the ends to which Dennett ultimately puts it may well presume too much. It is enough to note that some of his conclusions would be more difficult to maintain with any degree of logical consistency without a perspective that frames the development of religion as functional unity. Something like Dennett's prehistory of religion figures at least implicitly in most New Atheist accounts, typically with the suggestion that it leads directly into the sort of inquiry we see in Harris' account of Gujarat. No

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<sup>58</sup> *BtS*, 150

<sup>59</sup> *BtS*, 119

<sup>60</sup> *BtS*, 150

doubt Hitchens would see affinities between Dennett's account of early religious ritual and the visions of Little Pebbles presaging the violence in Rwanda.

Here we begin to leave the realm of perception and enter that of discourse. Such gestures at an unspoken complete history of religion marks a shift in method, from the sins of omission that make up the negative face of New Atheist historicism, to a positive face that in some sense deserves to be called doctrinal. Whereas Hitchens imparted a significant role to religion in the Rwandan genocides mostly by passing over the greater part of the relevant detail, Dennett is self-consciously providing it with a history. Inference could be relied upon to do most of the work in the case of Gujarat; here, interpretation takes over. By leaving out of account certain relevant details, Rwanda can be made to resemble an object lesson in the evils of religion; the genetic case, by contrast, is made by filling in the holes in our knowledge with so much speculative caulk.

In the end analysis, it may prove no coincidence that the Horsemen who devote the most effort to tracing out the origins of religion happen to draw, by contrast, fewer examples from more recent history. While the difference in focus may seem to indicate two different purposes at work – the *D-camp* committing itself to the task of explaining the persistence of religion, while the *H-camp* divulges the moral meaning of recorded history – it seems to me that each camp has bent their material to essentially the same end. For H-camp, the isolated example divulges, *pars pro toto*, the form to which all religious history conforms. Thus, an individual instance like the Spanish Inquisition is, in one sense, only a window into the enduring nature of religion itself. For D-camp, speculation about the origins of religion confirms that nature, and predicts the form that religion will take in instances that are, from the theoretical point of view, *pro forma*. Thus, a signal vibrating along the thin cord that issues from the first stirrings of preliterate animism may be discerned where it attaches to an event like the destruction of the World Trade Center Towers.

It is, in other words, not enough to draw dubious conclusions about the phenomenon of religion based on a few patchy accounts. To earn the name New Atheist, a student of history must posit something like an overarching structure to the history of religion. The New Atheist does not stop until the *Ecrasez l'infâme!* of Voltaire finds its roots in d'Holbach's insistence that, "By tracing the history of the human mind, we shall be easily convinced, that Theology has cautiously guarded against its progress."<sup>61</sup>

That unified history is, at best, merely retrogressive, but comes more fully into its own when it counterpoises secular progress with pious

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<sup>61</sup> Good Sense, §199

conflagration. When others seem to see religion contributing to human progress, they are mistaken. Mohandas Gandhi was “in a sense pushing at an open door”<sup>62</sup> in his efforts to secure independence for India, since the course of history had already tilted towards that end. Bad enough that the man’s efforts were needless, but as Hitchens explains,

it was precisely his religious convictions that make his legacy a dubious rather than a saintly one. To state the matter shortly: he wanted India to revert to a village-dominated and primitive “spiritual” society, he made power sharing with the Muslims much harder, and he was quite prepared to make hypocritical use of violence when he thought it might suit him.

That last charge, incidentally, concerns Gandhi’s timing in calling for the British to quit India. Hitchens notes that it came just as Japan was conquering Malaya and Burma, and suggests that this amounts to Gandhi “letting the Japanese imperialists do his fighting for him.”<sup>63</sup> Presumably, he should have waited until there were no other pressures so that the British Empire could withdraw on political and religious scruple alone.

Such cases are, for Hitchens, emblematic of the religious use of historical example as a tool of apologetic. Likewise, the way he dispatches with each may be taken as representative of a range of strategies for flattening the undulations of religious history into a smooth retrograde trajectory. Whenever religion appears to play a part in positive social change, the religious aspect masks a secular intent; if that argument cannot be made to match the evidence, then the worth of the apparently sincere religious reformer must have been grossly overestimated; or else appearances have deceived us, and a closer look will reveal all such triumphs as tragedies in disguise.

By the reverse process, apparently secular obstacles to the moral progress of civilization can be revealed, on closer examination, as examples of covert religiosity. Thus we find the title of Arthur Koestler’s *The God that Failed* taken as a reliable index of the sort of belief that supported the worst excesses of state Communism. Harris gives most emphasis to the arguments that a phrase like “the cult of Stalin” was in no sense ironic, despite the avowed atheism of those who belonged to it, and that some of the most widespread state-sponsored atrocities of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were, in fact, the result of uniquely modern religions. “Even explicitly anti-Christian

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<sup>62</sup> GING, 182

<sup>63</sup> GING, 183

movements, as in the cases of German Nazism and Russian socialism, managed to inherit and enact the doctrinal intolerance of the church,” he writes<sup>64</sup>, as though the unity of religious history naturally encompassed even the declared enemies of religion – though, of course, only those enemies that dabbled in atrocity. It would be going too far to consider the proposition that the New Atheist’s own rejection of religion is, likewise, the inheritance of “the doctrinal intolerance of the church.”

It should hardly need pointing out that, when you play so loosely with the concept of religion, history can be molded into nearly any shape desired. If the “worship” of an ideal like state socialism can be taken as an example of the corruptions of religious belief, then why should we hesitate to call Patrick Henry’s “give me liberty, or give me death” a sermon favorable to martyrdom in the name of a religious ideal? At times, the New Atheists’ criteria for drawing the boundaries of religious belief threatens to burst the seams of the concept of religion. In their hands, nearly any decisive belief could become either religious or secular, depending on the demands of their historical account. In the end, it seems, the only thing that gives the criteria internal coherence is the moral value they place on it: in the absence of a more identifiable feature, all negative examples are deemed religious, and all positive examples, secular.

A fuller examination of the question of how the New Atheist’s define religion will have to wait for a later essay; the immediate point is only that a certain flexibility in how they identify it in historical examples allows them to confirm the perception that religion constitutes a persistently counterproductive force. At the far extremes, that perception melds into a thoroughly ideological conception of the unity of history itself. That conception takes two roughly distinguishable forms, that of, on the one hand, the notion of ideal history, and on the other, of the doctrine of Progress. Both have their roots in the Enlightenment.

We are, perhaps, most familiar with the notion of ideal history by its expression in Marxist theory. History, as Marx would have it, is inexorably canted towards a benevolent anarchism, but must first pass through the dialectical stages of capitalism and socialism. But Marx received the notion of the dialectical progression of ideal history from the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and Marxism was neither the only nor the most recent flowering of Hegel’s work. Though overtly opposed to Marxism, the neoconservative movement in American politics also takes its direction from the Hegelian notion of history as a process with a distinct and predictable final state, concluding in a political system upon which no improvement could be made. For the neoconservatives, that final state is

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<sup>64</sup> *TEoF*, 100

Western Liberalism, and they take it as the moral and political obligation of the states that already embody that ideal to export it to populations still stuck in dialectically earlier stages of the historical progress. It may, then, be no mere coincidence that we find the title of one of the key documents of philosophical Neoconservatism, Francis Fukuyama's "The End of History?"<sup>65</sup>, echoed by Sam Harris' *The End of Faith*. The two also share, in significant ways, similar approaches to history, locating in the growth of 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century Rationalism the beginnings of a historical process that ends in the triumph of Liberalism over despotism. Particularly in Harris' account, Reason serves as an extra-historical process that, when dominant, drives history towards an inevitable and morally preferable end. As such, the notion of what Hitchens calls, with the apparent skepticism of a lapsed Marxist, "capital-H History"<sup>66</sup> bleeds into the realm of capital-P Progress.

Similar to, and sometimes allied with, the notion of ideal history, but more open-ended, the doctrine of Progress holds that the nature of human civilization guarantees the incremental improvement of the conditions in which successive generations will live. In his book *The Idea of Progress*, J.B. Bury has argued that the doctrine of Progress has historically served as a secular alternative to the religious doctrine of Providence. It allowed the secularists of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and beyond to retain the notion of a historical process guided by an external force, without committing them to the notion of a God who continually intervenes in that historical process.

While the treatment of historical example in *The God Delusion* may, in other regards, seem more nuanced than that in the books of the other Horsemen, when he turns to what may be called the general shape of history, Dawkins seems prone to the most overt kind of philosophical mysticism. A curious blend of the doctrine of Progress and pseudo-Hegelian philosophy stands in support of what Dawkins calls "the moral *Zeitgeist*." My essay on morality deals with that purported phenomenon at greater length, but for the moment suffice it say that Dawkins invokes "the spirit of an age" in order to give the doctrine of Progress a suitable material on which to work. Morality becomes not the province of individual behavior, but rather of attitudes unwittingly shared by entire generations. Briefly put, "The point is that we have almost all moved on, and in a big way, since Biblical times"<sup>67</sup> – something "has shifted in all of us, and the shift has no connection with religion. If anything, it happens in spite of religion, not

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<sup>65</sup> first published in *The National Interest*, Summer 1989

<sup>66</sup> *Why Orwell Matters*, 203

<sup>67</sup> *TGD*, 300

because of it.”<sup>68</sup> More to the point, “[t]he shift is in a recognizably consistent direction, which most of us would judge as an improvement.”

This all seems rather vague for an author who has spoken so specifically in preceding chapters on subjects ranging from the anthropic principle to the Great Vowel Shift, and indeed Dawkins relents by writing, “It is beyond my amateur psychology and sociology to go any further in explaining why the moral *Zeitgeist* moves in its broadly concerted way. For my purposes it is enough that, as a matter of observed fact, it *does* move, and it is not driven by religion”.<sup>69</sup> This stretches credibility, and poses a significant threat to any concerted effort to take Dawkins’ arguments seriously. There have been, he will admit, temporary reversals, but these have been relatively minor. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century alone, these include, presumably, the two largest international wars in history, several attempted genocides, the subjugation of two of the largest populations in the world under radically oppressive political regimes, the use of nuclear weapons against civilian populations, and so on, and so forth. “But over the longer timescale,” he assures us with morbidly laughable confidence, “the progressive trend is unmistakable and it will continue.”<sup>70</sup>

Ultimately, Dawkins’ evidence for the Progressive trend comes across as a species of bias confirmation, achieved by selecting the evidence to match the desired conclusion. In the end, it seems likely to have been motivated less by fidelity to the facts of history than by its author’s conviction that, “Whatever its cause, the manifest phenomenon of *Zeitgeist* progression is more than enough to undermine the claim that we need God in order to be good, or to decide what is good.”<sup>71</sup> In that, it figures as an only slightly more obvious example of the New Atheist approach to history. The irony is that, in the hands of so resolute a critic of the mysticisms of others, Dawkins’ avowal of an unquestionably progressive moral *Zeitgeist* itself constitutes a species of superstition.

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<sup>68</sup> *TGD*, 304

<sup>69</sup> *TGD*, 308

<sup>70</sup> *TGD*, 307

<sup>71</sup> *TGD*, 308

## CONVERT THEOLOGY

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ULTIMATE QUESTIONS, “if they indeed lie beyond the province of science,” writes Dawkins, “most certainly lie beyond the province of theologians as well.”<sup>1</sup> He suggests that the questions presumably addressed by theology are, after all, entirely meaningless, however misleadingly correct in their syntax and grammar. He suspects that qualified scientists who defer to religion on questions science has yet to answer are “bending over backwards to be polite,” saying, in effect, “theologians have nothing worthwhile to say about anything else; let’s throw them a sop and let them worry away at a couple of questions that nobody can answer and maybe never will.” *The God Delusion* continues in this vein for several pages, and Dawkins announces by way of a conclusion that he has “yet to see any good reason to suppose that theology (as opposed to biblical history, literature, etc.) is a subject at all.”

Curious, then, that Dawkins should prove to be a practitioner of theology. That claim will, no doubt, be taken by many as hyperbole, or a distortion of the language, contrived merely to shock. But I mean theology in the plainest sense: *theos* (god) + *logos* (word), as reasoning or discourse about gods. Let it not be supposed that a person need be a theist in order to practice theology – to do so is to confuse the narrower field of apologetic for the whole of theological thought – and any attempt to exempt Dawkins on grounds that he professes atheism will ultimately prove merely semantic. Theology is not a position on the question of whether or not gods exist; it is, rather, a methodology for making logical statements about them. True, that methodology can be employed for apologetic purposes, but it can also be used to debate the nature of the gods (as in Cicero’s *De natura deorum*), to suggest a radical revision of prevailing theological notions (as in Lurianic

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<sup>1</sup> *TGD*, 79-80

Kaballah), or even to deny the reality of God (as Dawkins implies of Spinoza's formula, *Deus sive natura*).<sup>2</sup> The defining difference between Dawkins' theology and that of most other theologians is that Dawkins employs his only in order to dispense with God, but that does not disqualify it from the category of theology.

A person who hopes to disprove a given mathematical proof can only do so by engaging in math. Likewise, it is virtually impossible to design a proof against the existence of gods without first defining the thing to be disproven. That initial circumscription is the beginning of theology. To give a more closely related analogy, and one perhaps more germane to Dawkins' own experience, Creationists who have hoped to discredit certain tenets of more traditional Darwinian theory have been subject to an almost irresistible pull towards the practice of biology, and specifically to the sort of functionalist evolutionary thought that Dawkins himself advocates. That pull practically defines the career success of an Intelligent Design advocate like Michael Behe, whose book *Darwin's Black Box*<sup>3</sup> was once the advance guard of the debate over Creationism. Dawkins would no doubt say that such advocates, however much they may aspire to scientific credibility, have approached the discipline in bad faith. Theologians might well make the same complaint with regards to Dawkins' theology.

When we examine some of the most notable examples of the genre, what we find is that much of the work is done almost surreptitiously. That is, in part, simply a consequence of rigorous logical argument. Premises lead to conclusions, and the collision of those conclusions sometimes have unforeseen consequences. But the geometric unfolding of logical necessity can also be used by astute minds to settle questions that have not been overtly addressed. To take an example close to the heart of much that will follow, consider the work of Thomas Aquinas.<sup>4</sup> In the course of addressing the question of God's existence, his *Summa Theologica* establishes a number of qualities of God, such as intelligence and goodness<sup>5</sup>. Those qualities are presented as though found in the joints and mortises of the logical demonstration. Aquinas does not ask, "Is God intelligent? Is God good?" Rather, he discovers (or, at least, claims to discover) them as necessary corollaries of premises that are, presumably, self-evident, such as that infinitely recursive causation leads to logical paradox. Since I do not intend to make an argument concerning whether or not God exists, we can

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<sup>2</sup> *TGD*, 39-40: Einstein is "a pantheist, like Spinoza," and "Pantheism is sexed-up atheism." More on this in the essay "A Drawing of Lines."

<sup>3</sup> Free Press: 1996

<sup>4</sup> 1225-1274

<sup>5</sup> Part I, Question 2, Article iii.



set aside the question of whether or not those premises are really given, as well as that of whether or not those corollaries really follow from them. The important point to note is the theological method, the way in which the nature of Aquinas' God is elaborated by a sort of lateral movement. In the course of addressing one question, he purports to have established the answers to several questions that it would have been awkward and perhaps question-begging to ask outright.

I would even go so far as to suggest that establishing those qualities, rather than demonstrating God's existence, was the intent of the discussion, since the existence of God is, at any rate, doctrinal to Catholicism and would have been taken for granted by Aquinas' audience. Aquinas himself concludes that God's existence is self-evident, though we do not always recognize as God what is self-evident to our understanding.<sup>6</sup> That suggestion would seem to be corroborated by the form of Aquinas' arguments. He concludes each of the Five Ways by which he claims the existence of God may be proven self-evident (and, again, the emphasis is not on whether or not God exists but on whether or not that existence is self-evident) with some variation of the formula, "And this we call God." There is, then, no pretense of drawing an irrefutably logical conclusion that God exists. Rather, Aquinas demonstrates the necessity of a first mover, a first efficient cause, a necessary (rather than contingent) existent, an ontological cause, and a teleological cause, and then merely identifies all those things as God. Overtly, the passage may say that God's existence is self-evident; the implicit (and, I would argue, central) message is that God is non-contingent, intelligent, the fount of all being, and so on. Those are not inconsequential conclusions; they addressed some of the central disputes of the era, disputes that were, for Christians, far more troublesome than that of whether or not God existed. It is not often recognized how potentially radical that act of naming was within the context of Catholic tradition; the introduction of newly recovered Aristotelian philosophy into Catholic doctrine constituted a revolution, and the Deism of the 18<sup>th</sup> century is not the least of the fruit it bore. Whatever apologetic end to which the passage may have been subsequently put, its immediate significance was that it settled Catholic theism on a very specific logical foundation. It is, in that regard, the narrow end of a pivot.

The point is important enough to reiterate: Much of the work of theology takes place beneath the surface of the apparent argument. Seen in the context of the theological disputes of the day, it becomes clear that Aquinas had more than the one straightforward question of existence in mind. The question was less that of whether or not God exists, than that of how. Nor is

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<sup>6</sup> Part I, Question 2, Article i.

it really possible to address the question of whether or not a thing exists without first establishing some of the qualities that define it. Consider, for example, Dennett's short hand demonstration in the case of *memes*: "Do meme's exist? Yes, because words exist, and words are memes that can be pronounced."<sup>7</sup> We can, on Dennett's account, know that memes exist because his examples give us some indication of the nature of memes. Likewise, without some inkling of the characteristics that define *a god*, there is no criteria by which a god could be recognized were it to be discovered. It is for precisely that reason that any attempt to assess the existence of gods must begin with some form of theology, no matter how rudimentary.

Dawkins' rejection of the field as illegitimate thus drives his theology underground. The most basic criticism that can be leveled against that theology is that it appears to have been structured with the needs of its refutation in mind. Much of the theology arising out of the *Summa Theologica* may be called subterranean in that the work of establishing it takes place beneath the surface of direct address; but when theology takes place beneath the guise of rejecting all theology, it can only be called covert.

Having embarked on the task of crafting a covert theology, it would seem the prudent course to limit one's application of *logos* to *theos* as much as possible. Dawkins seems to suppose he is doing just that when he writes, "I am not attacking any particular version of God or gods. I am attacking God, all gods, anything and everything supernatural, wherever and whenever they have been or will be invented."<sup>8</sup> Such ecumenicalism could only be achieved by either an extensive and systematic exploration of each instance of theism and/or supernaturalism, or striking at the universal root of what we mean by either. And since *The God Delusion* gives no indication of preferring the exhaustive route, it would be only reasonable to expect a categorical argument to sweep away all theism by a surgical explication of its very meaning.

Yet the book follows a significantly different route, and the reader may be excused for supposing that, in doing so, it fails to make good on the earlier claims to do away with "anything and everything supernatural." In fact, Dawkins does have a "particular version of God" in mind. Our first clear indication of this actually comes one paragraph earlier when he writes, "I decry supernaturalism in all its forms, and the most effective way to proceed will be to concentrate on the form most likely to be familiar to my readers – the form that impinges most threateningly on all our societies." To

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<sup>7</sup> *BtS*, 80

<sup>8</sup> *TGD*, 57

make certain no one has missed the contradiction there: Dawkins is “not attacking any particular version of God or gods,” but rather all gods, and he does so by concentrating on the particular version best known to his readers. He apparently intends the subject of his theology to serve as a synecdoche, where “the form most likely to be familiar to my readers” is meant to represent the largely category of deity in all its varieties.

As it turns out, that means, in the first place, an appeal to the Abrahamic tradition. Though an indignant note rings throughout his criticism of “monotheistic chauvinism,”<sup>9</sup> it rapidly grows clear that he does not intend to deal with polytheism any more than is required, and only, as Dawkins himself explains it, “to cover myself against a charge of neglect.”<sup>10</sup> Presumably it would not be the polytheists themselves who objected to the omission. Perhaps he means to justify the merely cursory treatment he gives by the assumption that history itself inevitably deals with polytheism. By way of introduction he writes, “It is not clear why the change from polytheism to monotheism should be assumed to be a self-evidently progressive improvement.”<sup>11</sup> Apart from the question of whether or not it is a progressive improvement – and if Dawkins is so certain about the “progressive” direction of history,<sup>12</sup> how could it fail to be? – the implicit assertion is that polytheism and monotheism are distinct and successive stages in the universal development of religion. Dennett gestures towards a similar conclusion in *Breaking the Spell*,<sup>13</sup> and neither author provides any justification for the assumption. Nor do they consider alternative hypotheses, such as that the polytheism we find in some cultures might be the result of the cultural syncretism that occurs when independent monotheisms are forced to share a social space. Dawkins and Dennett appear to have simply adopted wholesale from classical anthropologists like James Frazer and Edward Burnett Tylor the dubious theory of religion’s progression through a fixed set of historical phases.<sup>14</sup> Whatever discrepancies arise between the theism of polytheists and that of the Abrahamic tradition, Dawkins can sweep them away by claiming that polytheism is, after all, only a phase religion passes through on its way to monotheism. It is not that the subject he intends to describe fails to apply to

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<sup>9</sup> *TGD*, 53

<sup>10</sup> *TGD*, 56

<sup>11</sup> *TGD*, 52

<sup>12</sup> cf. “The Flattening of Historical Perspective” and “Landscapes and Zeitgeists”

<sup>13</sup> *BtS*, 205

<sup>14</sup> For some suggestion as to why, see “The Heirs of *La Coterie Holbachique*.”

the gods of polytheistic religions, but rather that it they have yet to fully mature. When they do, the applicability of his arguments will be assured.

For the moment, suffice it to suggest that polytheism does not merely anticipate monotheism; that Dawkins' facile dismissal does in fact fail "to credit the fertile diversity of traditions and world-views that have been called religious";<sup>15</sup> and that this does count against his aspiration to an ecumenical rejection of "all gods."<sup>16</sup> More critically, even within the province of monotheistic traditions, Dawkins' theology strays from "the form most likely to be familiar to my readers." In truth, it could not help but do so, since even the Abrahamic tradition, let alone monotheism in general, is too diverse to encapsulate in a single view. Dawkins himself is eager to set aside at least one version, that of the "old man in the sky with the long white beard," so as to dispel any accusations that he has built straw men, the easier to dash it, but his rejection of an admittedly "irrelevant distraction" ought to be no assurance that the god he ultimately deals with corresponds to "what the speaker really believes" – which is, Dawkins attests, "not a whole lot less silly."

The actual subject of his critique he calls "the God Hypothesis." The term deliberately recalls a popular anecdote concerning the astronomer and mathematician Simon-Pierre Laplace.<sup>17</sup> According to the legend, Laplace was granted a brief audience with Napoleon, who asked why the eminent scientist had made no reference to God in his magnum opus, *Mécanique Céleste*. Laplace is held to have responded, "Sire, I had no need of that hypothesis," thus laying the foundation for the modern formulation of a purported God Hypothesis. Though Dawkins seems to take the report at face value, there does not appear to be any first hand evidence for the exchange, and it may well be apocryphal. The earliest source I could find vouching for it comes from François Arago,<sup>18</sup> and was published roughly three decades after Laplace's death. There may then be some injustice in conferring on Laplace the distinction of having inspired Dawkins' theological construction; I hesitate to call the God Hypothesis anything more incriminating than *pseudo-Laplacean*.

Regardless of the authenticity of the story, it seems to be a favorite of New Atheists in general – Hitchens gives a lengthier version<sup>19</sup> – and neatly encapsulates one of the basic assumptions at root in Dawkins' theology. The God Hypothesis is, above all else, explanatory – or, perhaps more to the

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<sup>15</sup> *TGD*, 57

<sup>16</sup> These themes will be reprised in "The Taxonomy of Religion."

<sup>17</sup> *TGD*, 68n.

<sup>18</sup> London: 1857

<sup>19</sup> *GING*, 66-67

point, etiological. Dawkins defines it as the premise that, “*there exists a superhuman, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it, including us.*”<sup>20</sup>

Presumably this is meant to cut a wide swath, and Dawkins hints that, by defining his subject so, he means to sidestep the trap of dealing with “the particular qualities of Yahweh, or Jesus, or Allah, or any other specific god such as Baal, Zeus or Wotan.” Right away the critical reader can object that the God Hypothesis does not accurately describe the beliefs particular to some of those deities. Ancient Greek cosmology, for example, depicted the emergence of the world in terms of a natural process, and the gods of the Pantheon were, themselves, creatures rather than Creators. Other theisms present gods who create, but not deliberately, such as the demi-urge of ancient gnosticism. Even the term supernatural invites scrutiny, since not all theistic cultures have recognized the sharp division of the natural world from that of the gods. Indeed, for the larger part of its history, Christianity saw the human world as coextensive with the divine, and nature as pervading the whole.<sup>21</sup> The modern insistence on a dichotomy between natural and supernatural seems to be of relatively recent provenance. Aquinas may have laid the foundation when he wrote that miracles were actions of divine agency “beyond the order commonly observed in nature” (*praeter ordinem communiter observatum in rebus*),<sup>22</sup> but the worldview that linked the mundane with the divine in a single, natural order persisted more than 400 years after the death of Aquinas, and can be seen in its full flower in the works of Shakespeare and Donne.<sup>23</sup> During that period, miracles seem to have been regarded as a lacuna in the usual order of things, but not necessarily an indication that there was some other distinct and persistent order adjacent to it. The ontological territory seems to have been definitively redrawn only with the growth of modern science, and the explicit conception of a distinct supernatural order may have been devised specifically to demarcate the boundaries of scientific exploration. The supernatural, said Roger Bacon, lies beyond the methodological province of science, so let us turn our attention to the natural. The heavy contrast between the natural and the supernatural that was to form from that basis may indeed be an inheritance of Descartes’ predilection for dualism.

There would be no point in denying that theists do sometimes invoke their gods as explanations for natural or social phenomenon. Those

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<sup>20</sup> TGD, 52

<sup>21</sup> cf. eg. A. O. Lovejoy’s *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Harvard: 1936)

<sup>22</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III

<sup>23</sup> E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World-Picture* (Vintage: 1942)

invocations range from the seemingly naive, as when we find the origin of a particular agricultural tool attributed to the beneficence of the god Inara in Sumerian myth; to a sophistication that borders on obfuscation, like that described by the so-called God of the Gaps. But it does not follow, *post hoc ergo propter hoc*, that the gods of religious belief were posited for the purpose of explaining those phenomenon, nor that they should be defined according to etiological function. The God Hypothesis, as presented in *The God Delusion*, asserts the logical priority of the etiological, and to the exclusion of facets of theism that may ultimately prove more central.

Dawkins has long been an ardent opponent of Creationism, and specifically of the pseudo-scientific variety known as Intelligent Design, so it is perhaps no surprise that his theology bears the marks of those encounters. *The God Delusion* discusses the God of the Gaps almost exclusively in reference to the Creationists to whom he has long served as foil, but it is hardly an exaggeration to suggest that it informs his entire approach to the God Hypothesis. That approach is not without irony, as the notion of the God of the Gaps was first identified by religious figures arguing that there is no inherent conflict between theism and evolutionary theory. Dawkins traces the phrase “God of the gaps” to the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer; Bonhoeffer likely adapted it from a lecture by Scottish evangelist Henry Drummond. Both men warned against the apologetic strategy of locating God in the rapidly shrinking gaps in scientific knowledge. “If God is only to be left to the gaps in our knowledge,” Drummond asked, “where shall we be when those gaps are filled up?”<sup>24</sup>

Perhaps more to the point, there is a polemical edge in Drummond’s assertion that, “the idea of an immanent God, which is the God of Evolution, is infinitely grander than the occasional wonder-worker who is the God of an old theology.”<sup>25</sup> If by that older theology Drummond means pre-Christian religion, then we have no reason to take such a partisan characterization at face value. Archeologists and historians have found little to no evidential reason for supposing that ancient theists routinely fell back on their gods as an explanation for phenomenon that their technical sophistication was incapable of compassing. And yet Dawkins is apparently happy to seize on the God of the Gaps as an indication that virtually all theistic belief is characterized by the attempt to explain the unexplained, to provide a hypothesis where more practical methods have yet to provide a workable alternative, and that it is being driven into retreat by the advances of modern scientific inquiry. While some such notion appears in the work of all Four Horsemen, it is nowhere made more central than in the God

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<sup>24</sup> *Ascent of Man* (New York: 1894), 334

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*

Hypothesis, which seems very much designed to complete the process of driving theism to ground. After all, if the very definition of God hinges on its explanatory power, then surely it can be negated by a better substantiated explanation.



A significant feature of Dawkins' theology, then, is the implicit assertion that all theology impinges on the territory of science by seeking to explain by mere conjecture what science explores by a more salutary method. I do not intend to provide an exhaustive refutation of that premise, only to suggest that most theism is, in fact, motivated by a different set of concerns. To illustrate, it should be sufficient to ask whether most Christians seem more concerned with the cosmological question of how we can account for the existence of the world around us, or with the personal and social significance of sin and salvation. While it is true that the cosmological argument precedes the salvific in the *Summa Theologica*, can anyone seriously contend that Aquinas was more interested in causation than he was in redemption? What ultimately necessitates the existence of God for Christians is the question of justification; the inquiry into how the believing Christian may know that God exists has more to do with exploring the nature of the salvific God, of that God's relation to the world, than it does in establishing the raw fact of existence. All of which is to say that, while many theists will no doubt admit that they see God as "a superhuman, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it, including us," those terms are usually secondary to how an articulate believer would actually define the god of their belief. The God of Christianity is not primarily a supernatural First Cause, but rather self-sacrifice as the basis for ontological justification. The gods of other religions are likewise defined far less by their potential explanatory power than by the role they play giving significance to life. Etiology is almost invariably an evocation of that role rather than an end unto itself, which is why "moderate" religious believers can ultimately retain their religious commitments even as they part ways with literalism.<sup>26</sup> It is possible that decades of wrangling with Creationists have distorted Dawkins' perception in this regard.

Hopefully it is now clear that the claim made at the beginning of this essay serves a greater purpose than that of merely courting controversy. Recognizing that Dawkins has embarked on his own theology allows the reader to see how significantly the God Hypothesis diverges from the god(s)

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<sup>26</sup> For more on this topic cf. "The Taxonomy of Religion"

believed by any particular theist. Even where the theologian may admit some family resemblance, the acceptance of the Hypothesis tends to form a facet of their theism, rather than its core. And so: if not the deities of polytheism, nor the icons of caricature, and possibly not the God of actual monotheistic believers either, what is the subject of Dawkins' inquiry?

Dawkins defines his pseudo-Laplacean God in terms of three basic categories: ontology, intention and cosmology. Accordingly, the formal statement of the Hypothesis is easily divided into the three clauses that give substance to each category. *Ontologically*, the god described exists as "a superhuman, supernatural intelligence." The last term, "intelligence", also bears on the *intentional* category: God is an "intelligence who deliberately designs." And lastly God is defined by a role played in *cosmology*, as that which "created the universe and everything in it, including us."

The inclusion of "supernatural" in the ontological clause proves both expected and curious. Expected because, as both a scientist and a partisan in the debate over theism, Dawkins is an inheritor of Cartesianism on both sides of the family. Curious because it is his premise that "God's existence or non-existence is a scientific fact about the universe, discoverable in principle if not in practice."<sup>27</sup> Putting aside for the moment what it might mean to be "discoverable in principle" but "not in practice," there appears to be a serious contradiction involved here. If science is the study of nature, and God's existence or non-existence is a "scientific fact," then in what sense can that God be regarded as supernatural? It is difficult to evade the suspicion that Dawkins is paying lip-service to a dualism, the validity of which he does not, himself, intend to recognize.

Later on, that suspicion is partly confirmed when he argues that the technology of a more advanced alien civilization, "would seem as supernatural to us as ours would seem to a Dark Age peasant transported to the twenty-first century."<sup>28</sup> This is not, as he supposes, equivalent to Clarke's Third Law – "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic" – and it indicates, if nothing else, that Dawkins does not recognize a categorical difference between the natural and supernatural. He emphasizes that categorical confusion when he asks of such aliens, "In what sense would they be superhuman but not supernatural?" His answer is that, "The crucial difference between gods and god-like extraterrestrials lies not in their properties but in their provenance."

The rest of the passage is important to any assessment of Dawkins' argument, but for the moment what is important to note is his rejection of a distinction based on properties. The idea that only an evolutionary origin

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<sup>27</sup> TGD, 73

<sup>28</sup> TGD, 98



distinguishes between a god and a highly advanced and virtually omnipotent alien would be entirely foreign to the Abrahamic tradition Dawkins presumes to address. To those religious believers who affirm the natural/supernatural dichotomy, the supernatural category denotes an ontological difference – that is, a fundamental difference in what it means to exist. Consider, for example, the ontological difference critical to the Cosmological Argument. To avoid logical paradox, the Argument posits the existence of a First Cause that is not, itself, the effect of another cause. It would be difficult to overstate how fundamentally different the fact of its necessity would make such a First Cause from every other existing thing. When theologians suggest that it is misleading to talk of the supernatural as existing in the same way that we speak of the empirical world as existing, they usually have in mind such critical ontological differences.

Dawkins apparently does not. The relative weakness of his conception of the category of the supernatural shows not only in his discussion of the “difference between gods and god-like extraterrestrials,” but also in his facile dismissal of the Cosmological Argument. He is correct in noting that the first three arguments “rely upon the idea of a regress,” but not that they “invoke God to terminate it.” Rather, they point to the logical necessity of some terminal point, and assign to that terminal point the name of God. “As ever, the theist’s answer is deeply unsatisfying,” Dawkins writes, “because it leaves the existence of God unexplained.”<sup>29</sup> But as with any other terminal point that might be posited to take God’s place, explicability would disqualify a suggested First Cause, since it would indicate contingency. Any First Cause that could be explained as the effect of some prior cause would, by definition, cease to be a first cause. Whatever his faults may have been, Aquinas was no slouch when it came to logical argument. He does not invoke God to halt the regress; rather, he argues that a terminal point is logically necessary, and proclaims that terminal point, *whatever it is*, God. That is how Aquinas claims to know that there is, in fact, a subject matter to his theology, and Dawkins merely follows the common misconception of Aquinas’ “Five Ways” when he argues that, “They make the entirely unwarranted assumption that God himself is immune to the regress.”<sup>30</sup> Once the reader of *Summa Theologica* consents to call the hypothetical terminal point by the name God, it no longer makes sense to ask the question, “What created God?”

Borrowing Dennett’s terminology to distinguish between explanatory “cranes” and “skyhooks,” Dawkins argues that, “Skyhooks – including all gods – are magic spells. They do no *bona fide* explanatory work and

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<sup>29</sup> TGD, 171

<sup>30</sup> TGD, 101

demand more explanation than they provide. Cranes are explanatory devices that actually do explain.”<sup>31</sup> Apart from the fact that a criticism of this sort depends on the premise that God was posited first and foremost as an explanatory tool (a premise that Dawkins brokers in anecdotally rather than evidentially) it ignores that any real solution to the problem of causal redress will necessarily be a skyhook explanation. Cranes, in Dennett’s jargon, are explanations that build on underlying foundations, but any purported terminator to the regress of causation would fail to qualify as a First Cause. Perhaps it would be, as Dawkins suggests, “more parsimonious to conjure up, say, a ‘big bang singularity’, or some other physical concept as yet unknown,”<sup>32</sup> but if that conjuration cannot persuasively claim to have no antecedents then it will be open to the same question of origins. And if it is taken to be a necessary First Cause then it will also be, according to Aquinas’ formula, worthy of the name God. “Some regresses do reach a natural terminator,” Dawkins writes, but regardless of its truth the assertion carries no teeth as a rebuttal to Aquinas. True, it may be “by no means clear that God provides a natural terminator to the regresses of Aquinas,” but much depends on what is meant by “natural.” If the God of the First Cause argument does warrant the label supernatural, it can only be because it differs ontologically from the empirical world by virtue of its necessity. But in that case, any solution to the problem of infinite causal regress will necessarily qualify as supernatural, since it cannot be said to actually terminate the regress unless it is ontologically different in precisely the same way. Thus the question of provenance – which is, for Dawkins, central – becomes absurd. What Dawkins does not seem to recognize is that any answer to the problem of infinite causal redress must be immune to the question of provenance. No proposed solution of which that question could be reasonably asked and answered would qualify as an actual solution to the problem of regress.

It is a bit of a mystery why Dawkins would include the *supernatural* clause at all if he does not intend to treat it as qualitatively different from the natural. As we shall see, despite having defined the subject of the God Hypothesis as supernatural, Dawkins consistently treats the pseudo-Laplacean God as though it were a natural object. The careful reader must thus decide whether Dawkins has failed to make it clear precisely how far his use of the term supernatural departs from the usual sense in which it is understood, or has simply failed to consistently address one of the terms of his own definition. The anomaly is made all the more apparent by the terms in which Dawkins frames the God Hypothesis. Against the particular

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<sup>31</sup> *TGD*, 99

<sup>32</sup> *TGD*, 101-102

qualities brought to the table by theists of various religious stripes, he intends to “define the God Hypothesis more defensibly.”<sup>33</sup> That may sound charitable, but he is doing no one any favors. If nothing else, Dawkins’ claim to have demonstrated its falsity in the span of a few dozen pages renders that pretense hollow.

Rather, “defensibly” may be intended to recall a Popperian philosophy of science, as Hitchens does more explicitly when he writes, “I was educated by Sir Karl Popper to believe that a theory that is unfalsifiable is to that extent a weak one.”<sup>34</sup> To give a much truncated synopsis, Popper’s book *Objective Knowledge*<sup>35</sup> presented the argument that the methodology of science makes objective knowledge possible not by producing provably true hypotheses, but by eliminating demonstrably false ones. As such, to qualify as scientific a hypothesis must be, above all, falsifiable. In the context of Dawkins’ charitable redefinition of God, “defensible” may be little more than a euphemism for falsifiable; and, indeed, his demonstration of the falsity of that hypothesis depends in no small part on his having provided a falsifiable hypothesis. Presumably, a more traditional understanding of *supernatural* would be both more literally defensible as well as less falsifiable, much to the ire of Dennett who regards such distinctions as an evasion of doubtful sincerity.

In light of the foregoing, Dawkins’ affinity for the Laplace anecdote begins to take on a different cast. The implicit insistence that God is, above all else, a hypothesis suggests that something like Popper’s criteria ought to apply. This allows Dawkins to judge the God Hypothesis as he would any other scientific hypothesis. Unsurprisingly, the judgment is wholly negative.



Objections to the ontological aspects of the Hypothesis bear significantly on the intentional clause that God is an “intelligence who deliberately designs.” Those are the terms most operative in the book’s proposed “alternative view” that “*any creative intelligence, of sufficient complexity to design anything, comes into existence only as the end product of an extended process of gradual evolution.*”<sup>36</sup> The argument here is inductive: the only examples of intelligence that humans observe in nature are the result of an evolutionary process, and therefore so must be any other form of creative

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<sup>33</sup> TGD, 52

<sup>34</sup> GING, 81

<sup>35</sup> (Oxford: 1972)

<sup>36</sup> TGD, 52

intelligence we might posit. Immediately, problems result from Dawkins' failure to take seriously the inclusion of the term "supernatural" in his definition, since the introduction of an entity that is ontologically different draws into question the inductive premise. Even allowing for the inductive conclusion – and philosopher David Hume famously drew into question the logical justification for inductive reasoning – there is no *a priori* reason to assume that a conclusion drawn inductively from a contingent existent would apply in the case of a necessary existent.

Once the possibility is admitted, that contingent phenomena and necessary phenomenon differ so substantially that any proposed equivalence between them is questionable at best, it should become clear that more than induction is needed to establish the central premise of Dawkins' alternative view. Taken to a logical extreme like Universal Darwinism, the premise that intelligence indicates a prior evolutionary premise could be applied to any trait attributed to a First Cause. Dawkins may as well say, "any causal agent, of sufficient substance to cause anything, comes into existence only as the end product of an extended process of gradual evolution." The only objection is that, to do so is to deny the not only the conclusion, but also the premises of the Cosmological Argument. Dawkins passes up the opportunity to do so explicitly. He even seems to affirm them when he recounts the arguments made by his "theologian friends" (who must be friendly indeed to overlook his opinion of the field to which they have dedicated their professional lives): "There must have been a first cause of everything, and we might as well give it the name God. Yes, I said, but it must have been simple and therefore, whatever else we call it, God is not an appropriate name."<sup>37</sup>

As it happens, Catholic theology does hold that God is simple, so the only remaining point of contention is Dawkins' assertion that, "Entities that are complex enough to be intelligent are products of an evolutionary process"<sup>38</sup> – or more to the point, the implicit premise that only a complex entity can be intelligent. It is at least moderately clear why we should expect as much in the case of a contingent entity, but less so when it comes to entities belonging to some other ontological category. The dispute is complicated even more by an inquiry to what exactly theologians mean when they say that God is intelligent. Dawkins' caricatures of Thomistic theology conflate Aquinas' Fifth Way with the Divine Clockmaker of William Paley, who may be taken as emblematic of the sort of apologetic eschewed by Drummond and Bonhoeffer. Despite Dawkins' insistence that the Teleological Argument

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<sup>37</sup> TGD, 184

<sup>38</sup> TGD, 98

claims to prove that “there must have been a designer,”<sup>39</sup> it is more consonant with what Aquinas actually wrote to interpret the Argument as an explication of what it means to call God intelligent. Paley’s argument was that the discovery of any complex and apparently designed object in nature requires us to suppose that there must have been a designer, as we would were we to stumble upon a timepiece in the desert. By contrast, Aquinas talks of design not in order to substantiate the appearances of complexity, but rather to account for all action. He would have, no doubt, counted Newton’s Laws of Motion as an example of God’s intelligence. Aquinas’ point (of which Paley’s Divine Clockmaker is a diminution, just as the irreducible complexity of I.D. proponents is a diminution of Paley) is that the consistency of phenomenon in the natural world proves intelligible because it is caused by God. The intelligence of God, then, consists in the intelligible order of the universe. The principle admits of an almost pantheistic reading; since human intelligence is incapable of apprehending the essence of God apart from what is evident in Creation, we have no grounds for imagining God’s intelligence apart from its expression in nature. Dawkins is barred from interpreting it that way by his own exclusion of pantheism from consideration.

It may seem that, by talking of God’s intelligence in those terms, theologians of the Thomistic bent are capitalizing on a special sense of the term in order to make an argument for intelligence that would be unwarranted if they were to insist on the plain meaning of the word. That appearance of jargon is mostly an illusion of historical change. The sense in which Dawkins talks of intelligence as a property of the God Hypothesis is the result of centuries of semantic shift. That shift may be explained in part by the pressures put on the subject of intelligence by the development of nearly a millennium of study on human consciousness. In order to understand intelligence as a phenomenon in contingent beings, philosophy and science has had to constrain its meaning in ways that have gradually overtaken the public perception of what it mean to be intelligent. Intelligence had a broader sense when Aquinas wrote the *Summa*.<sup>40</sup> The quantitative sense most apparent in modern discussion of intelligence would have been largely foreign to his contemporaries, who regarded it as a faculty more akin to what we mean when we talk of apprehending or

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<sup>39</sup> 103

<sup>40</sup> Cf. eg. C.S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image*. Lewis is perhaps best known as an apologist for Protestant Christianity. He was also (and perhaps foremost) a scholar of medieval and Renaissance literature and society, and it was in that capacity that he wrote *The Discarded Image*. His apologetic, though perennially popular, is idiosyncratic and, as Lewis himself admitted, amateur.

recognizing a thing, and it would not have been wholly incomprehensible to talk of the universe as intelligent in the same way that Dawkins talks of it as anthropic. That is to say, any universe that made teleology possible would be an intelligent universe, and the cause on which that universe was ultimately contingent would have to be, in some way, responsible for that intelligibility.

Seemingly oblivious to the complications of debating a theologian across a span of eight centuries, Dawkins holds his ground. “The first cause that we seek,” he argues, “must have been the simple basis for a self-bootstrapping crane which eventually raised the world as we know it into its present complex existence.”<sup>41</sup> It would be interesting to know how Dawkins envisions the difference between a skyhook and a “self-bootstrapping crane.” They sound suspiciously synonymous, as though Dawkins could not bring himself to admit that accepting the logical necessity of a first cause also commits him to at least one skyhook. His entire objection to Thomistic theology threatens to pull apart under the stress of his unwillingness to follow the first cause argument to its logical conclusion.



In the interest of following his argument through to the end, it may worth temporarily overlooking the defects inherent in the first two clauses of his theology. The systematic argument he makes against theism (and, in its capacity as “the factual premise of religion”, one of three arguments against religion *in toto*) is made possible by the addition of the third clause, that God “created the universe and everything in it, including us.”

Dawkins himself calls his argument “the Ultimate Boeing 747 gambit.” His preference for that name is largely anecdotal; a more descriptive name would be the Probabilistic Argument Against the God Hypothesis, and as such, this is the last mention Fred Hoyle’s accidental 747 will receive here. For Dawkins it is “the central argument of my book,” and he summarizes it with six numbered points:

1. One of the greatest challenges to the human intellect, over the centuries, has been to explain how the complex, improbable appearance of design in the universe arises.
2. The natural temptation is to attribute the appearance of design to actual design itself. In the case of a man-made artifact such as a

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<sup>41</sup> TGD, 185

watch, the designer really was an intelligent engineer. It is tempting to apply the same logic to an eye or a wing, a spider or a person.

3. The temptation is a false one, because the designer hypothesis immediately raises the larger problem of who designed the designer. The whole problem started out with was the problem of explaining statistical improbability. It is obviously no solution to postulate something even more improbable. We need a ‘crane,’ not a ‘skyhook,’ for only a crane can do the business of working up gradually and plausibly from simplicity to otherwise improbable complexity.

4. The most ingenious and powerful crane so far discovered is Darwinian evolution by natural selection. Darwin and his successors have shown how living creatures, with their spectacular statistical improbability and appearance of design, have evolved by slow, gradual degrees from simple beginnings. We can now safely say that the illusion of design in living creatures is just that – an illusion.

5. We don’t yet have an equivalent crane for physics. Some kind of multiverse theory could in principle do for physics the same explanatory work as Darwinism does for biology. This kind of explanation is superficially less satisfying than the biological version of Darwinism, because it makes heavier demands on luck. But the anthropic principle entitles us to postulate far more luck than our limited human intuition is comfortable with.

6. We should not give up hope of a better crane arising in physics, something as powerful as Darwinism is for biology. But even in the absence of a strongly satisfying crane to match the biological one, the relatively weak cranes we have at present are, when abetted by the anthropic principle, self-evidently better than the self-defeating skyhook hypothesis of an intelligent designer.<sup>42</sup>

The greater part of the first three points, it is worth noting, are not so much an argument as they are an attempt to contextualize the problem. Objections to many of the points made therein have occupied the greater part of this essay to this point, but by way of recapitulation we may say that it is by no means clear that the problem of “how to explain the complex, improbable appearance of design” informed the early development of theism, nor that it should be central to an assessment of the grounds for theism; that the sense in which Dawkins here employs the term design

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<sup>42</sup> *TGD*, 188-189

reflects a later diminution of the sense it originally held for theologians; that, whatever its status for Paley, “the larger problem of who designed the designer” is actually precluded by the traditional Aristotelian and Thomistic versions of the Cosmological Argument; and that, despite his insistence to the contrary, Dawkins himself cannot logically evade the need for a skyhook rather than a crane. To those concerns we may add that it is unclear why we should suppose it natural to interpret deliberate design in the regularity of the world,<sup>43</sup> and that “the problem of explaining statistical improbability,” which is wholly alien to earlier theology, is brokered in by Dawkins by way of Paley and Hoyle, and implies a consonance between those theologians and their predecessors that simply does not exist.

It is with the fourth point that the Probabilistic Argument begins to take shape. “Natural selection is the champion crane of all time,” he tells us, putting himself squarely on the team preordained to win;<sup>44</sup> “nobody has ever thought of a better one.”<sup>45</sup> Not only does it explain “the whole of life; it also raises our consciousness to the power of science to explain how organized complexity can emerge from simple beginnings without any deliberate guidance.”<sup>46</sup> Such explanations are possible because “natural selection is a cumulative process, which breaks the problem of improbability into small pieces.”<sup>47</sup> If we assume that the “illusion of design in living creatures” was a motive force in the religious elaboration of theism, then we may well interpret the solution of that problem by *The Origin of Species* an instance of the displacement of religion by science.

Dawkins’ fifth summary point calls for a physical equivalent of Darwinian explanation. Some physicists, a certain “mischievous biologist” tells us, “are in need of Darwinian consciousness-raising.”<sup>48</sup> Actually, what Dawkins seems to have in mind is not so much an equivalent as it is the direct importation of the principle of natural selection into the field of physics – if not a Universal Darwinism in the expansive sense suggested by Dennett, then Cosmological Darwinism at the very least. To that end, Dawkins champions the suggestion of astrophysicist Martin Rees, that our universe could actually be part of a cluster of universes that adhere to varying combinations of by-laws. He then lights on “a tantalizingly Darwinian variant on the multiverse theory” propounded by theoretical physicist Lee Smolin, which holds that “daughter universes are born of

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<sup>43</sup> For the theme of “natural” assumptions cf. “The Taxonomy of Religion”

<sup>44</sup> *TGD*, 99

<sup>45</sup> *TGD*, 185

<sup>46</sup> *TGD*, 141

<sup>47</sup> *TGD*, 147

<sup>48</sup> *TGD*, 175



parent universes,” and that “the fundamental constants of a daughter universe are slightly ‘mutated’ versions of the constants of its parent.”<sup>49</sup> Acceptance of that theory allows Dawkins to broker heredity into cosmology, and with it, full-fledged natural selection. The apparent improbability that a universe with the proper fundamental constants to allow for the eventual appearance of intelligent life can thus be broken down, since only the “universes that have what it takes to ‘survive’ and ‘reproduce’ come to predominate in the multiverse.” Any readers who happen to be skeptical of Smolin’s Darwinian variant simply “have not had their consciousness raised by natural selection.”

And if all else fails, there remains the sixth point, that physics may yet produce a stronger crane by which to explain the improbability of our universe, and even if it does not, a weak crane like the multiverse theory is still a better explanation than the God Hypothesis. By way of those six points, Dawkins arrives at his grand conclusion, that “the factual premise of religion – the God Hypothesis – is untenable. God almost certainly does not exist.”<sup>50</sup>

The sixth point seems the weakest. The argument from “hope of a better crane” may be convincing to someone who has had their consciousness raised, but it does nothing to achieve the sort of comparison the rest of the argument is staked upon. Perhaps more to the point, in what sense is a “relatively weak crane” weak? If “weak” indicates that we are unable to substantiate some of the premises on which a crane is purportedly built, then in what sense is it a crane rather than a skyhook? And how would such a crane be *self-evidently* better than the “hypothesis of an intelligent designer?”

In light of questions of that sort, it should be at least conceivable that Dawkins’ reliance on so-called “consciousness raisers” is more a liability than an argument. To some degree it seems intended to function as a substitute for more compelling logic. If a physicist is not convinced by the Smolin’s Darwinian explication of the multiverse theory on its own merits, why should they want to be convinced by having their consciousness raised beforehand? We might ask how, in terms of its power to persuade, having one’s consciousness raised differs from indoctrination, or having one’s brain washed. The phrase is not all that far removed from the terminology used by ideologies Dawkins presumably would not condone, like Maoism or gnostic Christianity, so why should he regard it as an unqualified good when it pertains to “the power of natural selection?” Presumably he would answer that natural selection is true and those other ideologies are not, although it

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<sup>49</sup> *TGD*, 174-175

<sup>50</sup> *TGD*, 189

would beg the question to hang the argument on a hook like that. “It was the feminists,” he writes, “who raised my consciousness of the power of consciousness-raising,”<sup>51</sup> though presumably not those standing “in the ditzily unreal intersection of theology and feminism.”<sup>52</sup> His own skepticism with regard to that intersection ought to have cued Dawkins to the dangers of consciousness raising.

Even supposing the validity of evolutionary theory in the biological context, there remain grounds for supposing that having one’s consciousness raised by it might lead one astray. Analogies can be seductive far beyond their value as an index to relationships of meaning. It is entirely possible that a recognition of the immense biological explanatory power of evolutionary theory could lead one to hear echoes of it where there are none. For Dawkins and Smolin, the multiverse theory is provocative precisely because it permits an analogy between the evolution of biological forms and that of cosmological forms. Supposing that there is a multiverse, and that universes within it give birth to new universes with closely inherited physical laws, allows Dawkins to project evolution onto the stars, but the theory is vastly speculative. Just as a student of astrology may, through their own form of consciousness raising, come to see the workings of astral influence in the stock market, it should be recognized that every juncture at which Dawkins invokes consciousness raising in the place of a more logically compelling argument is the surrender of inquiry to the appeal of analogy. That Dawkins apparently has not girded himself against such hazards is curious since they are of exactly the sort a believer in memes might identify as opportunities for false ideas to proliferate at the expense of their human hosts.

To bolster the multiverse theory, Dawkins brokers in the Strong Anthropic Principle (SAP), or rather a version of it. Significantly, he writes in a footnote that Leonard Susskind, who himself advocates the application of the anthropic principle to the idea of a “megaverse”, also “says the idea is hated by most physicists. I can’t understand why. I think it’s beautiful – perhaps because my consciousness has been raised by Darwin.”<sup>53</sup> Notably, Smolin ranks among those with little love for the anthropic principle, if the acrimonious debate that passed between he and Susskind in 2004 is any indication. The debate began with Smolin’s claim that “the Anthropic

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<sup>51</sup> *TGD*, 140

<sup>52</sup> *TGD*, 57

<sup>53</sup> *TGD*, 173

Principle (AP) cannot yield any falsifiable predictions, and therefore cannot be a part of science.”<sup>54</sup> It ended in stalemate.

The anthropic principle itself was introduced in a 1973 paper by Australian theoretical physicist Brandon Carter,<sup>55</sup> and has since been subject to a number of reinterpretations of varying demonstrability. They vary so much, in fact, that even “religious apologists love the anthropic principle,” as Dawkins admits. “For some reason that makes no sense at all, they think it supports their case.”<sup>56</sup> The version Dawkins employs in the Probabilistic Argument was formulated by John Barrow and Frank Tipler in their book *The Anthropic Cosmological Principle*,<sup>57</sup> and differs in significant regards from Carter’s original.

The distinction between “weak” and “strong” versions of the principle was drawn by Carter himself. The weak version is actually the better grounded, as Carter himself asserts. “It remains true however,” he writes, “that whereas a prediction based only on the *weak* anthropic principle [...] can amount to a complete physical explanation, on the other hand even an entirely rigorous prediction based on the *strong* anthropic principle will not be completely satisfying from a physicist’s point of view since the possibility will remain of finding a deeper underlying theory explaining the relationships that have been predicted.”<sup>58</sup> That accounts for the wariness noted by Susskind. To understand why, it is important to note the difference between the strong and weak versions.

The Weak Anthropic Principle (WAP), on which the Strong is based, “consists basically of a reaction against the exaggerated subservience to the ‘Copernican principle,’”<sup>59</sup> which is Carter’s shorthand for the role the heliocentric model played in unseating humanity’s perception that it sat at the center of the universe. More to the point, the Copernican revolution is said to have shaken Europe’s confidence in the conceit that the universe was somehow arranged for humanity’s benefit. Historians have questioned the supposition that pre-Copernican Europeans regarded geocentrism as proof of the cosmological importance of humanity – it seems to have been more traditional to regard the sub-lunary realm as a cosmological backwater<sup>60</sup> –

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<sup>54</sup> “Scientific alternatives to the anthropic principle,” published in *Universe or Multiverse*, Cambridge:2007

<sup>55</sup> “Large number coincidences and the anthropic principle in cosmology.”

<sup>56</sup> *TGD*, 164

<sup>57</sup> Oxford: 1988

<sup>58</sup> Carter, 295

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.* 291

<sup>60</sup> Cf. eg. C.S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image*

but the significance for Carter is merely that deference to the Copernican principle sometimes leads scientists to behave as though the fact of our existence has no significance at all as a scientific observation. At the most basic level, the WAP allows us to assert that, if we know nothing else about the universe, we know at least that it is the sort of universe that allows for intelligence observers of a certain kind – that is: humanity. In certain circumstances, recognizing that our universe is anthropic makes it reasonable to predict observations about the universe that might not have been made had we remained slavishly bound to the Copernican principle. Carter uses it to demonstrate how certain “large number coincidences” that physicists have observed in the universe might have been predicted by simply recognizing that they would be necessary in an anthropic universe. The mathematics of that demonstration are beyond the scope of this essay, but to illustrate the use of the WAP it should be sufficient to say that any time a scientist is given the choice between two potential values in an unknown variable, one that suggests a universe that could support humans and one that could not, it would be reasonable to choose the former, even if there is, as yet, no other hard evidence to support it.

The strong version that Dawkins employs functions by asserting a higher degree of warrantability. As Carter puts it, “we must be prepared to take account of the fact that our location in the universe is *necessarily* privileged to the extent of being compatible with our existence as observers.” Claims made on the basis of that sort of necessity can be said to overreach Popper’s principle of objectivity, since claims made on the basis of the strong version prove less falsifiable than those made with the weak. In that regard, the SAP is strong not because the argument it makes is better grounded or more logically compelling, but because it relies on the force of assertion rather than that of experimentation. Perhaps counterintuitively, the WAP is more literally defensible. Once we recognize that “the Universe (and hence the fundamental parameters on which it depends) must be such as to admit the creation of observers within it at some stage,”<sup>61</sup> it becomes possible, though by no means logically compelling, “to promote a *prediction* based on the strong anthropic principle to the status of an *explanation* by thinking in terms of a ‘world ensemble.’” That “world ensemble” is very roughly analogous to Smolin’s multiverse or Susskind’s megaverse, but Carter calls such a maneuver merely “philosophically possible,” and then only “as a last resort, when no stronger physical argument is available.”<sup>62</sup> Carter seems to suggest it mostly as a hypothetical model for contrasting conceivable worlds, primarily those with constants that would not permit intelligent

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<sup>61</sup> *ibid.* 294-295

<sup>62</sup> *ibid.* 295-296

observers, with the anthropic universe we actually observe. That in itself is not sufficient grounds for assuming the actual existence of additional universes, but Dawkins seems to invoke it for almost exactly that purpose.

Here he seems to have made the same genre mistake as he earlier made with respect to Aquinas' Five Ways. He treats both as a species of ontological demonstration. In fact, both simply assume the very things they seem to establish. Therein, curiously, lies the strength of each. What they provide on the basis of those assumptions can be called the structure of a point of view. In the case of the cosmological argument, it is a point of view that represents the world of phenomenon as a series of effects that can be logically traced back to an initial cause. The power of that point of view is that, once the theist recognizes that initial cause as God, it provides a framework for understanding the natural order in terms of Providence. It provides, in other words, a rationale for the use (by Aristotelians, then Catholics, and later, Deists) of natural philosophy as a tool for understanding the nature of God. Dawkins complains that there is no methodology to theology, but the cosmological argument provides the basis for one. It is, in that sense, practically meta-theological.

The anthropic principle likewise asserts a formal relationship with an assumed cause in order to structure a pragmatic point of view. Substitute "human observers" for "the world," and "anthropic universe" for "first cause" – the formula works much the same. The result is a point of view that, in contrast to the Copernican principle, allows the scientist to infer from the second term the practical details of the first. Just as the cosmological argument provides a structure for discerning the nature of God by identifying God with the chain of causal events observed in the world of phenomenon, the anthropic principle discerns the nature of the universe by seeing in it the conditions for our existence as observers. In either case, the point is to build a case for deriving the nature of a remote, unknown cause by assuming its relationship to the immediately present.

As Carter recognized in the case of the anthropic principle, neither structure is convincing to the person who does not grant the thing assumed in each. Dawkins may have incorporated the SAP into the Probabilistic Argument on the strength of Carter's speculation that its use might oblige the granter to accept the conclusions it makes possible, whether or not they were palatable, but something like Carter's world ensemble are assumed in the SAP, not logically compelled by it.

But even granting the sort of cosmological evolution Dawkins assumes alongside Smolin, there is little reason to suppose that Dawkins has answered the same question as the addressed by traditional theology. Here it becomes necessary to recognize the distinction between taxonomic and ontological explanations: that is, between an explanation for the form a

thing takes, versus the explanation for the existence of the thing. In biology, evolution explains the forms taken by life, but in order to explain the existence of life biologists resort to another theory, abiogenesis. Without abiogenesis, there would be no biological process of evolution, because there would be no living material on which natural selection could act. Likewise, Dawkins' Probabilistic Argument brokers in cosmological evolution to explain how an anthropic universe could arise in a scheme in which universes already exist, but that does nothing to explain the prior existence of the material on which that process acts.

The cosmological argument begins by seeking out the terminal point of contingent causation. Whatever that terminal point may be, Aquinas consents to call it God. As such, the being that Aquinas recognizes as God exists necessarily, whatever we choose to call it, precisely insofar as the reader is willing to accept the premise that it is necessary to assume a first cause in order to avoid paradox. As noted above, so long as the terms of the first cause argument are accepted, it no longer makes any sense to ask how the entity Aquinas calls God came into existence: it exists necessarily, and that is precisely how it explains the existence of all of the contingent entities of which it is the cause. Because the cosmological argument functions by giving the name God to whatever first cause we may find, Aquinas' argument is applicable even if when Dennett suggests that we might just as easily assume that the universe itself exists necessarily. The result would merely be the sort of pantheism or pan-en-theism suggested by Spinoza. Logically, in fact, there seems to be no way around assuming at least one necessary cause: that is, at least one cause that exists, but not as the effect of anything else. Even supposing that time is cyclical and all the myriad phenomenon we observe are ultimately contingent on their own prior existence, we would have to suppose that the cycle itself is ontologically necessary.

So while Dawkins' suggestion that our universe evolved in the context of a multiverse provides a plausible explanation for how an anthropic universe could arise from an *a priori* background of non-anthropoc alternatives, in doing so it only pushes the ontological question further back. We might as easily ask whether the multiverse that gave birth to our universe was, itself, the product of a prior evolutionary process. Ultimately, the advocate for cosmological evolution will be forced back on exactly the same sort of first cause assumption that informs the cosmological argument, if they are not to resign themselves to the notion that "it's turtles all the way down," as Stephen Hawkins' anecdote goes.<sup>63</sup> A dyed-in-the-wool Aristotelian, Thomist or Deist could simply match the multiverse advocate step for step

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<sup>63</sup> *A Brief History of Time*, Bantam:1988

and say, Good then, *that* is God. If they are serious in calling the first cause, whatever it is, God, then there is no way to gainsay that, except by insisting, as Dawkins does, on anchoring it to a “more defensible” definition. But, as noted earlier, the God Hypothesis is the product of Dawkins’ own theological efforts, and does not necessarily correspond to the theology of actual theists. By contrast, a multiverse, merely by name, implies certain features that might bar it from corresponding to that initial cause: i.e. as a collection of universes, it must be, if nothing else, complex. We may ask (as the skeptic reasonably asks of Paley’s divine clockmaker, but not of Aquinas’ first cause), yes, but how did the multiverse get there? And if the answer proves to be that, after all, there must be some initial, necessary cause, then perhaps it is the multiverse that should be put to Occam’s test. At any rate, we have no grounds for supposing that it is, as Dawkins claims, *more* probable than God, since something like Aquinas’ God may still be necessary to account for its existence.



If, to now, this essay has dwelled at length on the argument Dawkins presents, to the exclusion of the other Horsemen, the reason is that Dawkins’ theology aims higher than that of his compatriots. Where the marks of theological contemplation surface in the books of Dennett, Harris and Hitchens, they tend to be brief and unconnected. It may not be unreasonable to suppose that more lies behind, indicating theologies that are, if anything, more covert than the one Dawkins covers with little more than a blanket denial that theologians say anything at all.

For example, in *Breaking the Spell*, Dennett “tentatively” defines religions as “*social systems whose participants avow belief in a supernatural agent or agents whose approval is to be sought.*”<sup>64</sup> It might be expected, then, that he would at some point inquire into what those supernatural agents are believed to be. But unlike Dawkins, Dennett does little to address the theists’ rational grounds for their belief, and so has little cause to wrangle with them over which conception of god is most “defensible.” The reasoning presented for that position is, that an observer cannot reliably distinguish between what is presumably believed by a religious adherent, and what is merely professed. On that basis, Dennett claims to be persuaded that “Hume’s project of natural religion (evaluating arguments for and against the existence of God) is largely wasted effort,”<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> *BtS*, 9

<sup>65</sup> *BtS*, 234

but by the same logic it proves likewise impossible to say for certain that Dennett believes that rather than merely professes it.

"The logical arguments" presented by religion, he writes, "are regarded by many thinkers, including many philosophers who have looked at them carefully for years, to be intellectual conjuring tricks or puzzles rather than serious scientific proposals," and illustrates that claim with a caricature of Anselm's Ontological Argument<sup>66</sup> (which, similar to the Cosmological Argument, only demonstrates the existence of something, "than which nothing greater can be conceived," and understands that thing as God).<sup>67</sup> From there he moves in quick order through the Cosmological Argument and the Argument from Design. But the examination never seems more than perfunctory, as though Dennett also felt the need to cover himself against a charge of neglect. Rather, Dennett's grand strategy is to build a case for a process whereby such beliefs form with little or no reference to the agency of the believer. Another essay, "The Diagnostics of Belief," will examine that theme in more detail; here the point is only that it allows Dennett to largely avoid grappling with theology by making the case that, after all, the believer should feel no vested interest in their beliefs.

What does stand out in Dennett's inquiry, though, is the insistence that the role of those supernatural agents must be active. If what theists "call God is really *not* an agent in their eyes," he declares, "a being that can *answer* prayers, *approve* and *disapprove*, *receive* sacrifices, and *mete out* punishment or forgiveness, then although they may call this Being God, and stand in awe of *it* (not *Him*), their creed, whatever it is, is not really a religion according to my definition."<sup>68</sup> Those, it might be noticed, are all interpersonal interactions with individuals, and Dennett does not include in his list acts like Creation, which would certainly qualify the Creator as an agent. Omissions of that sort presumably would excuse the Deists on grounds that the God of their creed is presently too inactive to qualify as the subject of religious belief. What they have "is, perhaps, a wonderful (or terrible) surrogate for religion, or a *former* religion, an offspring of a genuine religion that bears many family resemblances to religion, but it is another species altogether." The biological analogy is, as I have shown elsewhere,<sup>69</sup> close to the heart of Dennett's argument. The immediate point, though, is that theology only properly addresses the gods of religion, which is to say the interactive gods of interpersonal relations; anything else is, for Dennett, merely "symbolic," which he seems to regard as the tacit

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<sup>66</sup> *BtS*, 243

<sup>67</sup> *Proslogion*, Chapters II & III

<sup>68</sup> *BtS*, 10

<sup>69</sup> Cf. "The Taxonomy of Religion"



disavowal that gods are, after all, anything at all. “The core phenomenon of religion,” he proposes, “invokes gods who are effective agents in real time, and who play a central role in the way the participants think about what they ought to do.”<sup>70</sup> If the point is not yet sufficiently clear, he clarifies, “If what you hold sacred is not any kind of Person you could pray to, to consider to be an appropriate recipient of gratitude (or anger, when a loved one is senselessly killed), you’re an atheist in my book.”<sup>71</sup>

In *The End of Faith*, by contrast, we see theology elevated to an act of extremism. Harris asserts that “the very ideal of religious tolerance – born of the notion that every human being should be free to believe whatever he wants about God – is one of the principle forces driving us toward the abyss.”<sup>72</sup> Does that mean that human beings should *not* be allowed to believe whatever they want about God? That would seem to be taking the polemical atheist’s position to an extreme, however logical. At the very least, he seems to mean something more than that there should be no variety to theological belief.

Yet, like the other Horsemen, Harris is at least overtly critical of the theological enterprise. “If religion addresses a genuine sphere of understanding and human necessity,” he writes, “then it should be susceptible to *progress*; its doctrines should become more useful, rather than less. Progress in religion, as in other fields, would have to be a matter of *present* inquiry, not the mere reiteration of past doctrine.”<sup>73</sup> A strange tension stands between the idea that tolerance of the differences that pass between different theisms is so potent that it is “driving us toward the abyss,” and that, at the same time, there is no progress in religion. Is it not a contradiction to suppose that religious belief is entirely static, but that it has nevertheless giving rise to a dangerous variety? Perhaps he means that theological knowledge, to the extent that it is knowledge, ought to be steadily converging. It does not seem to have occurred to him that the branching of theological systems could be a form of progress.<sup>74</sup>

That frustrating ambiguity remains nearly constant throughout Harris’ critique of theism. He often finds it blameworthy for aspects that, not a dozen pages further on, it is held not to have. Perhaps the only thing consistent in such dueling criticisms is the suggestion that theism *should* be antiquated. The criticism of “religious moderation” is an continual theme

<sup>70</sup> *BtS*, 11-12

<sup>71</sup> *BtS*, 245; more on that in “A Drawing of Lines”

<sup>72</sup> *TEoF*, 15

<sup>73</sup> *TEoF*, 22

<sup>74</sup> Cf. “The Heirs of *La Coterie Holbachique*” for the New Atheist conception of Progress.

throughout both *The End of Faith* and *Letter to a Christian Nation*. In the latter, Harris argues that liberal and moderate theists “don’t know what it is like to *really* believe in God.”<sup>75</sup> They “refuse to draw any conclusions whatsoever about God from his works. God remains an absolute mystery, a mere source of consolation that is compatible with the most desolating evil.”<sup>76</sup> Indeed, the problem of theodicy is central to Harris’ rejection (and, it could be argued, his definition) of theology, and he declares that “theology is now little more than a branch of human ignorance,”<sup>77</sup> wholly on the grounds that it has failed to satisfactorily resolve that problem. Given the existence of human suffering, “liberal theology must stand revealed for what it is: the sheerest of mortal pretenses. The theology of wrath has far more intellectual merit.”<sup>78</sup> To have so much as recognized the existence of “liberal theology” could be considered a kind of charity on Harris’ part. The impression formed by nearly every other statement he makes on the subject is that there is no such thing. That would no doubt come as a surprise to most of the prominent theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as, for example, Paul Tillich, whom Harris describes as a “blameless parish of one.”<sup>79</sup>

It would be possible, no doubt, to gather up such criticisms and infer from them an at least semi-cohesive theology. It seems clear, for example, when Harris writes, “If God exists and takes an interest in the affairs of humans, his will is not inscrutable,” that he means to approve a theology of wrath, against any supposition that, “We cannot say, for instance, that God was wrong to drown most of humanity in the flood of Genesis, because this is merely the way it seems from our limited point of view.”<sup>80</sup> Are all gods, then, necessarily benevolent? But, on the whole, there is less in either book to convict Harris of practicing covert theology than there is in *The God Delusion*, and he could, no doubt, evade the charge by arguing that such speculation was merely tactical, allowing him to drive a wedge between liberal and fundamentalist theists.

*God Is Not Great* also contains a few brief gestures at theology. Some of them suggest the outlines of what could be called the *Candide* argument, which bases its rejection of theism on the premise that any Creator that actually existed would have created a better world than this one. For example, in discussing the independent evolution of two sets of eyes in three different species of fish, Hitchens asserts that a “creative deity, of

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<sup>75</sup> *LtaCN*, 83

<sup>76</sup> *LtaCN*, 48

<sup>77</sup> *TEoF*, 173

<sup>78</sup> *LtaCN*, 48

<sup>79</sup> *TEoF*, 65

<sup>80</sup> *LtaCN*, 48 & 49

course, would have been more likely to double the complement of optics in the first place,” rather than leave the task to evolution, “which would have left us with nothing to wonder about, or to discover.”<sup>81</sup> The phrase “of course” conveniently stands in for any explanation of why that should be considered “more likely.” The God of Hitchens’ theology apparently has a plan that precludes any use or space for wonder or discovery. Though it is unclear whether or not Hitchens has Leibnitz (or, for that matter, Voltaire’s caricature, Pangloss) in mind, it seems likely that such theological declarations are built in opposition to some prior conception of God. So much heavier is the irony when he writes, “though I dislike to differ with such a great man, Voltaire was simply ludicrous when he said that if god did not exist it would be necessary to invent him.” When it suits his purpose, Hitchens does just that. But the god he implies we would have to find if any were to exist remains unfocused, thoroughly blunt and awkward as a tool of criticism.

Perhaps this is because Hitchens regards theology as a ship that has already sailed. “Religion,” he declares, “spoke its last intelligible or noble or inspiring words a long time ago: either that or it has mutated into an admirable but nebulous humanism, as did, say, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a brave Lutheran pastor hanged by the Nazis for his refusal to collude with them.” Presumably Hitchens arrived at that estimate of Bonhoeffer’s theological worth by studying some of the theologian’s several dissertations or the dozen or so books that he wrote even during the period of his resistance to the Nazi party, but if so, he does not say which. Bonhoeffer belongs to the post-Newman era, the age of Reason. As such, his primary value lies in his martyrdom for humanism, as Hitchens’ eulogy implies, rather than in the work to that occupied the decade and more before his death. “We shall have no more prophets or sages from the ancient quarter,” Hitchens concludes, “which is why the devotions of today are only echoing the repetitions of yesterday, sometime ratcheted up to screaming point so as to ward off the terrible emptiness.”<sup>82</sup>

Augustine, Aquinas, Maimonides and Newman: Hitchens confidently predicts that posterity will “never again have to confront the impressive faith” of theologians of that caliber. The reason, he explains, is that, “Faith of that sort – the sort that can stand up at least for a while in a confrontation with reason – is now plainly impossible.”<sup>83</sup> It was possible then only because the great theologians “were living in a time of abysmal ignorance

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<sup>81</sup> *GING*, 84

<sup>82</sup> *GING*, 7

<sup>83</sup> *GING*, 63

and fear.”<sup>84</sup> Not only does this suggest a caricature of the past, as well as belief in the irreversibly progressive direction of history; it also deliberately blurs the boundaries of their theology. “Aquinas half believed in astrology,” Hitchens confides, “and was convinced that the fully formed nucleus (not that he would have known the word as we do) of a human being was contained inside each individual sperm.” We need not even wonder whether these are accurate representations of Aquinas’ thought, since Hitchens does not bother to explain how either bears on the claim that God exists.

Presumably, he does not intend for such complaints to attack traditional theology at the level of logical argument; to do so would require that he recognize that theology does, after all, contain such arguments. He denies that implicitly when he calls theology “faith of that sort” and pits it “in a confrontation with reason,” as though reason were an invention of the Renaissance or Enlightenment.<sup>85</sup> If we can agree that “Augustine was a self-centered fantasist and an earth-centered ignoramus,” then we need not even begin to consider the arguments he made concerning God. Hitchens does not seem to consider that a form of *ad hominem*, nor does it strike him as a species of genetic fallacy to dismiss the whole lot by proclaiming that, “Religion comes from the period of human prehistory where nobody – not even the mighty Democritus who concluded that all matter was made from atoms – had the smallest idea what was going on.” Notably, when he does turn to address the arguments themselves, he engages not Augustine or Aquinas, Maimonides or Newman, but rather the watchmaker argument of William Paley.

But all of that has been addressed in the discussion of Dawkins’ theology. Hitchens’ more characteristic contribution is the clairvoyance with which he declares the field of theology dead. His complaint is not that theology never had a proper subject matter, as Dawkins quips; when humanity was in its infancy, theology was the best it could do, but it has since put away such childish things. There have been no great theologians since the death of Cardinal Newman at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, nor could there have been any. Everything written on the subject in the 120 years since belongs to the post-history of theology, a wasteland littered with the work of Karl Barth, Teilhard de Chardin, Martin Buber, Rudolf Otto, Charles Taylor, Alvin Plantinga and so on, and so forth. Perhaps they would have been grateful if someone had informed them, prior to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, of the death of their field.

But we need not suppose that Newman wrote the final comprehensible word on god. It remains possible to take Hitchens’ declaration of the end of

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<sup>84</sup> GING, 64

<sup>85</sup> More on this theme in “The Heirs of *La Coterie Holbachique*.”

theology seriously by interpreting his own slight gestures towards a personal theology as indicative of the culmination of the field. That is to say, the final work of theology may be only the definition of a god so unacceptable that the theologian himself literally cannot believe it exists. I see no way to deny that, if affirmed, such a theological conception would form, very much literally, a terminal point for the history theology. It gives substance to Nietzsche's much quoted and frequently misunderstood allegation that we have killed God.

Since Hitchens does not actually address the arguments of contemporary theology directly, the reader is left to merely suppose that he has actually inquired into them, though we can only guess at which texts he may have read. Perhaps all of them. If we are generous, we may assume so. After all, he need not have made any such grandiose proclamations about the future of theology at all, and it would be highly presumptuous of him to assume the untenability of arguments with which he is not familiar. The ungenerous alternative is to suppose that he has issued his categorical dismissal in order to give substance to the pretense that he is qualified to judge the theological enterprise, precisely because he stands at the end of it. More than that, it allows him to reverse the accusation, to charge the modern theologians with neglect, since they have failed to address the impossible gods of the Horsemen's own theology.



## THE DIAGNOSTICS OF BELIEF

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IF THE FOUR HORSEMEN are to be believed, nothing could be more imperative for the maintenance of civilization than to understand the nature of religious faith. “The argument with faith,” Hitchens writes, “is the foundation and origin of all arguments, because it is the beginning – but not the end – of all arguments about philosophy, science, history, and human nature.”<sup>1</sup> He agrees with Harris that there is a “confrontation between faith and civilization,” one that is made critical by the advent of more and more destructive weaponry.<sup>2</sup> Yet he never manages to give the same precision to the word *faith* as he does to his condemnation of it. He seems to use it in the two familiar senses of, in the first place, a type of mental activity, as in “to have faith in a doctrine”; and in the second, of social cohesion around a body of doctrine, as in “the Islamic faith.” But those two senses are related, and it is not always clear where one sense leaves off and the other begins. To understand precisely what faith means in the context of *God Is Not Great*, it becomes necessary to read between the lines.

It is, first of all, limited to the religious. “Our beliefs are not beliefs,” Hitchens assures us, speaking of those who have grasped his four irreducible objections to religion. “Our principles are not a faith.”<sup>3</sup> He declares the totalitarian societies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century “fundamentalist and, as we would now say, ‘faith-based,’”<sup>4</sup> less to show that secular systems are likewise vulnerable to the appeal of faith than to suggest that totalitarianism is never truly secular. “All that the totalitarians have demonstrated,” he argues, “is that the religious impulse – the need to worship – can take even

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<sup>1</sup> GING, 12

<sup>2</sup> GING, 280

<sup>3</sup> GING, 5

<sup>4</sup> GING, 250

more monstrous forms if it is repressed.” Thus, Hitchens departing from a trip to North Korea “was leaving a totalitarian state and also a religious one.”<sup>5</sup> He agrees, in short, with Orwell that, “*A totalitarian state is in effect a theocracy*,”<sup>6</sup> though from a strictly categorical perspective that seems to get the relationship precisely backwards: theocracy is a form of totalitarianism, and not vice versa.

All of this suggests, though Hitchens never quite comes to the point, that faith is a means of controlling behavior. Harris gives a more explicit account of that connection, but for the meantime it should be sufficient to note that Hitchens judges faith-based behavior in primarily moral terms, and finds it lacking. He provides one telling example in the figure of Joseph Kony, the Ugandan warlord of the Lord’s Resistance Army noted for its fervor and savagery. Hitchens compares Kony’s Christianity with that of one of the rehabilitation centers he visited, where the victims of the LRA’s violent activity were tended to, and where he asked one of the volunteers how he knew which was “the truest believer,” he or Kony. “Any secular or state-run outfit could be doing what he was doing – fitting prosthetic limbs and providing shelter and ‘counseling’ – but in order to be Joseph Kony one had to have real faith.”<sup>7</sup> Presumably no one who lacked such faith could be a warlord. More to the point, perhaps, Hitchens insists, “that ethics and morality are quite independent of faith, and cannot be derived from it.”<sup>8</sup> This may be because “conscience is innate,” a lesson Hitchens claims to derive from Plato, despite recognizing that Socrates himself credited a divinely inspired interior voice.<sup>9</sup> Presumably no faith was involved in Socrates’ decision to trust his *daimon*.

Either way, that imperative – the insistence that ethics and morality *cannot* be derived from faith – seems to draw Hitchens into self-contradiction, since *God Is Not Great* abounds with examples of religious believers deriving ethical provisions from premises taken on faith. The catch is simply that Hitchens disagrees with their ethical perspective, finding it abhorrent. He would not likely frame the disagreement in quite those terms. The problem, from his perspective, is that “religion and faith and superstition distort our whole picture of the world.”<sup>10</sup> The corrective for such distortion rests with reason, but faith and reason are inherently at odds

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<sup>5</sup> *GING*, 247-248

<sup>6</sup> from Orwell’s “The Prevention of Literature,” (1947), quoted in *GING*, 232

<sup>7</sup> *GING*, 189

<sup>8</sup> *GING*, 52; see “Landscape and Zeitgeists” for discussion of how morals sometimes are, in fact, derived from religious thought.

<sup>9</sup> *GING*, 256

<sup>10</sup> *GING*, 41



with one another. Reason, even in the relatively undeveloped guise of pure skepticism, dispels faith, and so faith, at its strongest, resists reason. At times, though, faith lacks conviction, and religion betrays itself in the attempt “to escape mere reliance on faith and instead offer ‘evidence’ in the sense normally understood.”<sup>11</sup> That, for Hitchens, is the essence of theology. Ultimately, it is doomed. Faith bears the indelible mark of its religious origins in “the period of human prehistory where nobody [...] had the smallest idea what was going on.” That inheritance is writ large in the major conflicts of the modern era, and so, “All attempts to reconcile faith with science and reason are consigned to failure and ridicule for precisely these reasons.”<sup>12</sup> Perhaps worst of all, faith is proactive, intrusively so. “It ought to be possible for me to pursue my studies and researches in one house,” writes Hitchens, “and for the Buddhist to spin his wheel in another. But contempt for the intellect has a strange way of *not* being passive.”<sup>13</sup>

The closest Hitchens gives us to a diagnostic understanding of faith comes, perhaps not surprisingly, in the midst of his defense against misrepresentations of atheism. “Those who have believed what the priests and rabbis and imams tell them about what the unbelievers think and about how they think, will find further such surprises as we go along. They will perhaps come to distrust what they are told – or not take it ‘on faith,’ which is the problem to begin with.”<sup>14</sup> If those two sentences are taken as indicative of the phenomenon as Hitchens conceives it, then it becomes possible to draw a number of conclusions about the nature of faith. They tell us that faith descends from authority; that it is a matter of unquestioning trust; that it is, first of all, passive, even if, once accepted, it must be defended aggressively. Most significantly, his defense also makes explicit an important connection that, elsewhere, Hitchens is mostly content to leave implied: that between faith and belief.

Some form of that general scheme is evident in the work of each of the Four Horsemen. I have started the inquiry with Hitchens because, though it represents an important component of his critique of religion, he devotes the fewest pages and the least acumen to understanding the function of faith and belief. *The End of Faith* and *Breaking the Spell* make that concern central, and treat it at greatest length. Yet, without some suggestion that the cognitive activity of the religious differs critically from that of atheists, much of the critique offered by the work of the Four Horsemen would feel gutted and feeble. It informs nearly every passage of all six books,

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<sup>11</sup> GING, 97

<sup>12</sup> GING, 64-65

<sup>13</sup> GING, 203-204

<sup>14</sup> GING, 10

sometimes so implicit that it evades notice altogether unless the reader pauses to imagine what the argument would look like without it.

Dawkins, for example, summarizes the proofs offered by the *Catholic Encyclopedia* for the existence of purgatory thus:

If the dead simply went to heaven or hell on the basis of their sins while on Earth, there would be no point in praying for them. 'For why pray for the dead, if there be no belief in the power of prayer to afford solace to those who as yet are excluded from the sight of God.' And we do pray for the dead, don't we? Therefore purgatory must exist, otherwise our prayers would be pointless! Q.E.D. This seriously is an example of what passes for reasoning in the theological mind.<sup>15</sup>

That last incredulous remark could almost be excused as an innocent turn of phrase were it the only time Dawkins had made use of it. As it happens, variations on the term "theological mind" or "religious mind" recur throughout *The God Delusion* with surprising regularity, and never convey anything more sophisticated than approbation.

Not only the proofs for purgatory offered by the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, but likewise the concept of purgatory itself "offers a preposterous revelation of the way the theological mind works."<sup>16</sup> That applies not only to theological concepts, but to scientific theory as well, and we are duly informed of "the difficulty the theological mind has in grasping where the complexity of life comes from."<sup>17</sup> That, in part, may be the reason that "confusion arises in the religious mind" over the proper use of the anthropic principle.<sup>18</sup> "The president of a historical society in New Jersey," we are told, "wrote a letter that so damningly exposes the weakness of the religious mind, it is worth reading twice." The passage Dawkins reprints actually expresses a difference of opinion quite cordially, and addresses it to no less

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<sup>15</sup> *TGD*, 403; actually, as the context of the *Encyclopedia* entry makes clear, the passage Dawkins has quoted is meant to substantiate only the claim that, "The proofs for the Catholic position, both in Scripture and in Tradition, are bound up also with the practice of praying for the dead," not that the practice itself proves the concept.

<sup>16</sup> *TGD*, 401

<sup>17</sup> *TGD*, 179-180

<sup>18</sup> *TGD*, 164; see "Covert Theology" for the suggestion that Dawkins has likewise misinterpreted the anthropic principle, and to much the same end.

daunting an intellect than Albert Einstein, but Dawkins assures us that it nevertheless “drips with intellectual and moral cowardice.”<sup>19</sup>

The much publicized case of Edgardo Mortara,<sup>20</sup> the 19<sup>th</sup> century child of Italian parents who was secretly baptized and then made a ward of the Roman Curia, “is particularly revealing of the religious mind, and the evils that arise specifically *because* it is religious.” Dawkins apparently sees that case as especially demonstrative, as he repeats the term “religious mind” a sentence later to point out its tendency to take precedence “over everything that ordinary common sense and human feeling would see as important.” And again, that the parents would not convert in order to have their son back is taken to demonstrate “the fatuousness of the religiously indoctrinated mind.” Dawkins, for his part, can “think only of poor little Edgardo – unwittingly born into a world dominated by the religious mind,” but for good measure, he throws in a few more mentions of the religious mind: one to cite the sincerity of the Catholic apologists as proof of “the power of (mainstream, ‘moderate’) religion to warp judgment and pervert ordinary human decency,” and another to level a charge of “crass insensitivity to normal human feelings – an insensitivity that comes all too easily to a mind hijacked by religious faith.”<sup>21</sup>

Robert Swinburne’s moral argument for theodicy he calls a “grotesque piece of reasoning, so damningly typical of the theological mind,” then quotes Peter Atkins as “splendidly” suggesting that Swinburne “rot in hell.”<sup>22</sup> Likewise, “A certain kind of religious mind cannot see the moral difference between killing a microscopic cluster of cells on the one hand, and killing a full-grown doctor on the other.”<sup>23</sup> Paul Hill was apparently one such person, and was executed in 2003 for the murder of Dr. John Britton and his bodyguard. Dawkins writes, “I don’t think Paul Hill was a psychopath. Just very religious.” Ditto for Michael Bray, who had supported Hill. “I actually quite liked him,” Dawkins confides, adding that “his mind had unfortunately been captured by religious nonsense.”<sup>24</sup> By much the same token, Isaac Watts must have had is “mind tuned to theology” when he wrote a hymn thanking God that he was “born of Christian Race / And not a Heathen or a Jew,” and Kurt Wise’s “pathetic and contemptible” adoption of

<sup>19</sup> *TGD*, 38

<sup>20</sup> *TGD*, 349-354

<sup>21</sup> See “The Irreligious Right” for discussion of how Dawkins’ characterization of religious education as “child abuse” implicitly makes the case for analogous forms of intervention.

<sup>22</sup> *TGD*, 89

<sup>23</sup> *TGD*, 333

<sup>24</sup> *TGD*, 334-335

Christian Creationism “brings to the surface what is secretly going on underneath, in the minds of fundamentalists generally, when they encounter scientific evidence that contradicts their beliefs.”<sup>25</sup>

The repetition draws attention to the generalization. It is, as the sections on Harris and Dennett will show, difficult enough to draw any sharp conclusions about a person’s beliefs even when they claim to believe something. For Dawkins, it is not enough to draw inferences about the workings of Swinburne’s mind, or Paul Hill’s, or that of the president of a New Jersey historical society. Those figures are representative as mere specimens of an abstract ideal, “the religious mind,” that presumably operates on a different set of principles from that which prevails in the minds of secularists. Indeed, “atheism nearly always indicates a healthy independence of mind and, indeed, a healthy mind,”<sup>26</sup> whereas religion may be likened to a “virus of the mind.”<sup>27</sup> Hitchens points to much the same conclusion when he writes that, “The connection between religious faith and mental disorder is, from the viewpoint of the tolerant and the ‘multicultural,’ both very obvious and highly unmentionable.”<sup>28</sup> Indoctrination, Dawkins speculates, takes advantage of the instinctual trust children have for authority figures in order to infect them with such mind viruses;<sup>29</sup> moreover, religion as a whole may be an example of paedomorphosis, “the retention into adulthood of childhood characteristics.”<sup>30</sup>

Whether the analogy is to pathology or psychology, the gist is the same: religious minds are functionally different from normal adult minds. The language of Dawkins’ discussion of Edgardo Mortara suggests that they are inhuman, and the qualifications Dawkins gives when discussing Paul Hill and Michael Bray assures us that it is specifically religion that has made them immune to normal human feeling. For something like a full diagnostic account of how religion accomplishes that feat, we shall have to turn to Harris; Dawkins, for his part, offers only a general and abstract condemnation.

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<sup>25</sup> *TGD*, 322

<sup>26</sup> *TGD*, 26

<sup>27</sup> *TGD*, 216; see also “Viruses of the Mind”, published in *A Devil’s Chaplain* and *Dennett and His Critics: Demystifying Mind*, ed. Bo Dalhborn (Cambridge:1993).

<sup>28</sup> *GING*, 53

<sup>29</sup> *TGD*, 203-206

<sup>30</sup> *TGD*, 391-392



“The human brain,” Harris writes, “is a prolific generator of beliefs about the world. In fact, the very *humanness* of any brain consists largely in its capacity to evaluate new statements of propositional truth in light of innumerable others that it already accepts.”<sup>31</sup> In order to see the weakness of that proposition one need only reflect that computers already evaluate propositions in just that way, without thereby becoming believers. Yet your very humanity, as he would have it, is premised on your ability to assign a binary value – true or false – to any given proposition, and something about the religious mind compels it to act contrary to that nature.

Harris first outlined that scheme in *The End of Faith*. Since that time, he has earned a PhD in neuroscience, and in the course of doing so seems to have encountered some factual challenges. To the end, we find him writing in *The Moral Landscape* that,

There is no reason to think that any of our beliefs about the world are stored as propositions, or within discrete structures, inside the brain. Merely understanding a simple proposition often requires the unconscious activation of considerable background knowledge and an active process of hypothesis testing.<sup>32</sup>

Nevertheless, Harris is eager to insist on the propositional character of belief. Thus he qualifies that acknowledgment by declaring, “And yet our beliefs can be represented and expressed as discrete statements.” He seems to regard that vulnerability to translation as an adequate foundation on which to build a complete diagnostic of belief in propositional terms.

The central, defining premise of his account is that, “To believe a proposition we must endorse, and thereby become behaviorally susceptible to, its representational content.”<sup>33</sup> That axiom may be broken down into a series of simpler claims. The first is, that belief relates specifically to the statement of a proposition; the second, that belief is primarily a form of endorsement, or, as described by the title of the section of *The End of Faith* from which Harris’ premise is drawn, “a matter of true and false”; the third, that the potential for action rests in the endorsement of a proposition; and the fourth, that beliefs are primarily, if not exclusively, representational. Additionally, “There are good reasons to think that the process happens

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<sup>31</sup> *TEoF*, 51

<sup>32</sup> *TML*, 116

<sup>33</sup> *TEoF*, 60-61

quite automatically – and, indeed, that the mere comprehension of an idea may be tantamount to believing it, if only for a moment.” These claims prove vastly consequential, and each must be verified before we can accept his synthetic argument.

Before we begin evaluating those premises, though, it is important to notice a semantic confusion that runs throughout Harris’ account, namely between the declarative and imperative modes. For example, he argues that, because our beliefs naturally aspire to the status of knowledge, “we cannot help but value evidence and demand that propositions about the world logically cohere.”<sup>34</sup> At the very least, it overstates the case to say that we *cannot*; at worst, it involves him in a logical contradiction. Experience shows that we are, after all, capable of ignoring the value of evidence, even denying it, in certain contexts. Harris himself waves away the mountain of evidence and analysis marshaled by Robert Pape on the subject of suicide terrorism, with no comment on the reliability of the evidence itself. He justifies his dissent with the utterly unsubstantiated (and arguably *ad hominem*) argument that “most commentators on this infernal wastage of life” are, like Pape, “unable to imagine what it would be like to actually believe what millions of Muslims profess to believe.”<sup>35</sup> In so arguing, he places the value of his own theory above the value of evidence. Thus, to take the earlier claim seriously, we must read it as a hyperbolic way of emphasizing his conviction that we *ought* to value evidence and demand logical coherence.

This is-ought problem infects the whole of Harris’ diagnostic account of belief,<sup>36</sup> and can make it difficult to discern when exactly the reader is meant to take a declaration at face value. It might even be possible to read Harris’ assertion that propositions are the (presumably exclusive) content of belief not as a declaration of what beliefs are, but rather as an imperative outlining what they should be. In practice, belief tends to be messier than that. Specifically, it seems that Harris has gotten the relationship of belief to propositional truth almost precisely backwards. Nearly any belief can be converted into a proposition. Such conversion ultimately proves necessary if we are to discuss beliefs logically, but it does not follow that belief formation involves the evaluation of propositional statements, nor that we can perform such conversion without loss to the substance of some beliefs. Harris’ treatment suggests the logical priority of propositional evaluation, but there is, as yet, no reason to suppose that such propositions chronologically or psychologically precede belief as a matter of course, and

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<sup>34</sup> *TEoF*, 51

<sup>35</sup> *TEoF*, 260, fn. 2

<sup>36</sup> As well as his account of morality; see “Landscapes and Zeitgeists.”

perhaps more reason (much of it provided by *The Moral Landscape*) to suppose the exact reverse.

Nor is it particularly clear how Harris intends to square his narrow focus on true-false assessment with the claim that “the human brain is a prolific generator of beliefs about the world”<sup>37</sup>, which seems to suggest a more creative, rather than analytical, behavior. In fact, his account almost entirely avoids the question of belief formation. That the brain evaluates “new statements of propositional truth in light of innumerable others that it already accepts” suggests the prior existence of beliefs, but Harris never explains how we arrive at those prior beliefs, nor where the propositions we evaluate come from. As far as *The End of Faith* is concerned, they come from nowhere at all, or are discoverable parts of the natural landscape. “Belief, in this sense,” he tells us, “is what philosophers generally call a ‘propositional attitude.’”<sup>38</sup> Where Harris has gone wrong, I would suggest, is in treating belief from the outset as though it were always consciously propositional, or could always be translated into propositional terms with no change to the content of that belief.

To illustrate, suppose that we confront a subject with the proposition that her husband loves her, and ask her whether or not she believes that proposition. “Yes,” she answers, but the affirmation is only the claim to believe; it is not the belief itself. It is possible that, at the time, she does not really *feel* that her husband loves her (perhaps because he has been rather aloof that day), and that she has affirmed the proposition only intellectually, because she thinks it likely that, tomorrow, or a week from now, she will feel differently. It could be said, though not quite in the sense that Dennett explains it, that she believes in the belief; in other words, that she believes that she has reason to believe the proposition, even if, cognitively or emotionally, something prevents her from committing to it. In that case, the translation of belief into a propositional statement fails to encompass the experience of belief.

Harris likewise struggles with presenting that experience; the furthest he can get is to say that some commentators simply do not understand what it is like to believe, without himself providing a description of the experience. The very fact that he acknowledges an interior quality to belief contradicts his assertion that belief is strictly a matter of affirming a binary proposition.

Moreover, he writes, “Belief, in the *epistemic* sense – that is, belief that aims at representing our knowledge about the world – requires that we believe a given proposition to be *true*, not merely that we wish it were so.”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> *TEoF*, 51

<sup>38</sup> *TEoF*, 246 fn. 3

<sup>39</sup> *TEoF*, 61-62

It is worth noting, first of all, that he has simply presumed there to be an epistemic sense of belief. That belief must correspond to some state of the world – that it is, in other words, a propositional attitude – implies that there is no other sense by which to understand belief. Moreover, even as he asserts that epistemic sense, he seems intent on preserving a distinction between belief and knowledge, i.e. “belief that aims at representing our knowledge.” The imprecision of his language invites confusion. If, for example, knowledge is not a species of belief, then what is it? How does belief “represent” knowledge? It may only be by entertaining such imprecision that Harris is able to insist that belief necessarily entails the affirmation of a proposition. He attempts to bolster it by locating that logical imperative in the language itself. Thus he argues that the word “because” necessarily “suggests a *causal* connection between a proposition’s *being* true and a person’s believing that is.”<sup>40</sup> And further on: “There must be some causal connection, or an appearance thereof, between the fact in question and my acceptance of it.”<sup>41</sup>

Experience tells us that need not be so; “because” need only suggest a causal connection between some imperative and a given belief, as it does in the statement, “I believe Harris would not advocate executing Archbishop Desmond Tutu for his religious beliefs *because* I prefer to believe that Harris is a reasonable man.” The latter clause need not be true in order to account for the former. The imperative the drives a given belief may be correspondence to fact, but it may also be fidelity to theory, or emotional preference. It is, at any rate, by no means clear that we form beliefs as a binary response to a proposition. Nevertheless, Harris argues, “To believe that God exists is to believe that I stand in some relation to his existence *such that his existence itself is the reason for my belief*.” In so arguing, Harris has erroneously conflated theism with apologetic. Indeed, the arguments presented not only by Harris, but also by Dawkins, often seem to suffer from a failure to distinguish between the two. To believe that Germany will win the next World Cup is decidedly *not* to believe that I stand in some relation to the event such that its having occurred is the reason for my belief, since I can entertain the belief even though it is impossible for me to stand in epistemic relation to the event. But to believe that it will happen and to argue that it is logically or evidentially necessary are two different activities.<sup>42</sup> In the latter, as in the attempt to demonstrate the existence of God, the argument must ultimately connect the proposition

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<sup>40</sup> *TEoF*, 62

<sup>41</sup> *TEoF*, 63

<sup>42</sup> Cf. e.g. John Henry Cardinal Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, Part 1, on the distinction between inference and assent.



to the fact. Harris has failed to demonstrate that belief itself is so constrained.

Moreover, he has failed to demonstrate that it necessarily *should* be constrained to direct correspondence with objective fact. If beliefs can be narrowly construed as principles of action, as Harris insists that they may, then the objective truth of what is affirmed by them becomes, from a strictly behavioral point of view, incidental. It then becomes possible to justify belief on the basis that it makes possible a desired program of action. That, in essence, is the position described by American pragmatists like the late Richard Rorty.<sup>43</sup>

It need not be denied that a statement of belief can, as Harris suggests, imply an epistemic claim to the effect that the truth of the proposition is the cause of the belief, but it does not follow that all beliefs entail that relationship. Defaulting again to the descriptive where the imperative would be more appropriate, he argues that,

I cannot say, however, "I believe that God exists because it is prudent to do so" (as Pascal would have us do.) Of course, I *can* say this, but I cannot mean by the word "believe" what I mean when I say things like "I believe that water is really two parts hydrogen and one part oxygen because two centuries of physical examination attest to this" or "I believe there is an oak in my yard because I can see it."

This implies that a person's grounds for entertaining any given belief bear directly on the meaning of belief in general. There are no grounds for supposing that to be so. In the case of belief as a propositional attitude, it certainly does not change the fact that they have affirmed the proposition in question. If we wish to preserve the form of his argument, we could say, rather, that the speaker does not mean "because" in the same sense in both sets of statements, but to argue that the effect falls on the term "belief" seems a particularly dubious species of sophistry.

Nor is it certain that the preceding can be satisfactorily squared with the point to which Harris is leading, namely that "beliefs are *principles of action*."<sup>44</sup> The route by which he arrives at that conclusion is evolutionary

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<sup>43</sup> Cf. e.g. "Truth without Correspondence to Reality", collected in *Philosophy and Social Hope* (Penguin:1999) for a relatively unencumbered statement of the pragmatic view of the relationship between objective truth and programs of action. See "Landscapes and Zeitgeists" for more on the similarities between Harris' arguments and pragmatic philosophy.

<sup>44</sup> *TEoF*, 52

and instrumental in nature: belief has proven useful in that it allows us to make predictions about the world, and thus to tailor our actions to predicted circumstances.<sup>45</sup> It may even be true that the capacity for belief evolved in that way, but as a basis for defining belief, the evolutionary account proves problematic. It is one thing to say that a capacity for belief is a necessary condition for anticipatory behavior, and quite another to say that, therefore, belief is strictly limited to the role it plays in facilitating such behavior. Nothing in Harris' account logically compels us to suppose that, alongside the beliefs that *are* principles of action, there might not be some class of beliefs that are not.

We may say this much, at least: some beliefs appear to be only potentially actionable. In *Breaking the Spell*, Dennett claims to believe that  $e=mc^2$ . Given that he is, by his own admission, "not really *believing the proposition*" but merely "believing that *whatever proposition is expressed by the formula 'e=mc<sup>2</sup>' is true,*" it is difficult to see how that proposition could itself be a principle of action for Dennett. It is, in the context of both Dennett's understanding and experience, a trivial belief. If Dennett were to appear on a game show, he would no doubt answer in accordance with that belief when asked the equation described by Einstein's theory of relativity. But Dennett continues to believe the proposition, even when his trivial belief stands no chance of winning him cash and prizes, ie. even when it is not actionable.

For Harris, the correspondence of belief to propositional language, and thus to behavioral possibility, is embedded in the very structure of the world. "Words are arranged in a systematic and rule-based way (syntax)," he declares, "and beliefs are likewise (in that they must logically cohere), because both body and world are so arranged."<sup>46</sup> That analogy leaves much to be desired, since few languages fail to conceal a number of irregularities. Some, like English, actually thrive on those irregularities. More to the point is his claim that beliefs are (note the declarative) arranged likewise, and precisely because they reflect the structure of the body and of the world. This is a more controversial line of reasoning than Harris concedes. If nothing else, it depends on the *a priori* claim that "certain logical relations" may be "etched into the very structure of our world."<sup>47</sup> As it turns out, there is no way to verify that premise, since logic determines the shape of any

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<sup>45</sup> Cp. Dennett's analysis in *Freedom Evolves*; given Dennett's penchant for constructing new books out of excerpts from previous books, it is interesting to note that, except for the concept of intentional states, the related discussion is not reprised in *Breaking the Spell*.

<sup>46</sup> *TEoF*, 58

<sup>47</sup> *TEoF*, 54

systematic inquiry we might make into the structure of the world. It is, again, possible that he has gotten the actual relationship backwards: that logic has the appearance of being etched into the structure of the world because we see the world through the lens of human logic.<sup>48</sup>

If Harris forges boldly on, it would seem that his ultimate goal is to establish the phenomenon of belief as the ground on which to stake some claim of objective access to the world. In brief: "There is a point at which the meanings of words, their syntactical relations, and rationality itself can no longer be divorced from the orderly behavior of objects in the world."<sup>49</sup> The purported relationship between reason and the structure of the world provides Harris with an opportunity for arguing that beliefs necessarily behave according to rule-bound relationships. "The first thing to notice about beliefs," Harris writes, "is that they must suffer the company of their neighbors. Beliefs are both logically and semantically related."<sup>50</sup> That would certainly be true of a logical proposition, but its applicability to belief remains an open question. Here, in particular, the is-ought confusion reigns. For example, "When going to a friend's home for dinner," he writes, "I cannot both believe that he lives *north of Main Street* and *south of Main Street* and then *act* on the basis of what I believe."<sup>51</sup> But only a page later he provides an anecdote in which he and his wife entertain opposing beliefs about the desirability of being near the American Embassy in Paris, and find that they have nevertheless acted on both of those beliefs. On the basis of his own experience it ought to have been clear to Harris that we can, after all, simultaneously entertain mutually contradictory beliefs and act on those beliefs; surely he meant only that we "ought not" do so.

That confusion cuts straight to the heart of the argument that "logical and semantic constraints appear to be two sides of the same coin, because our need to understand what words mean in each new context requires that our beliefs be free from contradiction (at least locally)."<sup>52</sup> Approximately how local that coherence must be is a matter of some import, and one upon which Harris fails to elaborate. The French archeologist and historian Paul Veyne has explored just that question in a challenging monograph entitled

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<sup>48</sup> Functionally, Dennett's term "free-floating rationale" serves only to project certain logical relations onto the world as though it were objectively clear that the world functioned according to our explanations. To see how uncertain that formulation must always be, try to describe a "free-floating rationale" that isn't already the subject of theory.

<sup>49</sup> *TEoF*, 58-59

<sup>50</sup> *TEoF*, 53

<sup>51</sup> *TEoF*, 54

<sup>52</sup> *TEoF*, 53

*Did the Greeks Believe In Their Myths?*<sup>53</sup> One much simplified way of putting his answer might be, “as locally or globally as the situation demands.” In practice, humans are capable both of holding in close proximity two logically incompatible beliefs, and of ensuring logical consistency among an extensive array of independent beliefs. As we shall see when we return to the subject of Osama bin Laden’s motives, Harris himself demonstrates that flexibility. If there is, as he argues, “a degree of logical inconsistency that is incompatible with our notion of personhood,”<sup>54</sup> then we may well ask whether or not he has crossed it.

Moreover, even if we read his account as merely asserting the practical value of logical consistency, rather than, as he repeatedly insists, its strict necessity, there is still a fatal obstacle to its achievement, since “total coherence, even in a maximally integrated brain, would be impossible to achieve.”<sup>55</sup> Thus, the reader has a choice of interpretations, one that is logically incoherent because it claims that, though self-delusion is clinically normal, logical coherence is necessary for personhood; or one that is frankly self-defeating, since it makes a necessity out of something that is impossible.

This, like most of the firmly stated assertions of the chapter, is never given concrete form. Just as Harris never specifies what “degree of logical inconsistency [...] is incompatible with our notion of personhood,” nor to what extent a person can, without sacrificing their humanness, “tacitly believe one proposition, while successfully convincing himself of its antithesis,” he neglects to identify the objective point of contact that connects language and belief to the objective reality it sometimes aspires to describe. In light of the objections made here, the single most formidable task facing anyone who would defend Harris’ account may be simply specifying the limits of so many vague and unverified claims.



Allow that the same belief may be either actionable or merely potential, or that the action corresponding to a given belief may not be entirely inevitable, and Harris’ argument falls apart. Returning to the bin Laden example, Pape has compellingly demonstrated<sup>56</sup> that jihadi organizations

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<sup>53</sup> Chicago: 1988

<sup>54</sup> *TEoF*, 54

<sup>55</sup> *TEoF*, 57

<sup>56</sup> “The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism,” *American Political Science Review* 97, no 3 (2003), 20-32; also *Dying to Win* (Random House:2005).

are characteristically responsive to political concessions. Consideration of the historical evidence shows that terrorist campaigns typically follow a strategic logic. Once they have achieved a limited objective, it is reasonable to expect them to end. Were it clear that jihadi terrorists were committed to violence by their belief in religious absolutes, we could not reasonably expect that to be the case. Harris' rejection of Pape's research reveals the extent to which he is willing to assert the primacy of a narrowly construed relationship of belief to behavior.

Because the relationship of belief to action is, on his account, automatic, their professed religious beliefs ought to render bin Laden and Al Zawahiri literally incapable of a strategic approach to limited goals. It seems Harris has made little allowance for the apparent fact that two people who hold the same belief will sometimes behave differently on the basis of some other criteria: e.g. temperament. This is one of those instances in which I would exhort the reader to choose kindness to Harris over the temptation to take his account seriously. If we took Harris at his word, then might it not be morally incumbent upon us to make sure that he never encounter anyone who professes one of those prohibited beliefs? After all, if beliefs are to be narrowly construed as principles of action, then how can we read his claim that it may be ethical to kill over some beliefs, save as an admission that Harris himself intends to kill?

I would argue, rather, that Harris' temperament all but precludes him from any suspicion that he would actually kill someone on the basis of their beliefs alone. In the cases of bin Laden and Al Zawahiri we are justifiably much less confident, but not because of their beliefs alone. The beliefs Harris associates with their behaviors are by no means unique to terrorists. Among Muslims, there are, by Harris' accounting, a minimum of "200 million avowed supporters of terrorism,"<sup>57</sup> all of whom are required, if Harris is to be trusted, to believe that "a Muslim aspiration for world domination is explicitly enjoined by God," and that "martyrdom is the only way that a Muslim can bypass the painful litigation that awaits us all on the Day of Judgment and proceed directly to paradise."<sup>58</sup> Then by his logic we ought to expect there to be a minimum of 200 million active terrorists, and the inexplicable puzzle becomes, why are we infidels not already dead? The most logical possibilities are: that Harris has misrepresented Islam and its adherents; that Harris has gotten the nature of belief wrong; or that a significant proportion of that 200 million have misrepresented their beliefs. None of those possibilities are mutually exclusive.

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<sup>57</sup> *TEoF*, 126

<sup>58</sup> *TEoF*, 34

In light of the problems entailed by Harris' account, allow me to sketch the rough outlines of an alternative diagnostic of belief. I have already suggested that we need not suppose, as Harris seems to, that the affirmation or rejection of fully formed propositions will be characteristic of belief formation. If nothing else, the exclusive association of belief with propositional attitudes would seem to require the prior acquisition of language, since propositions cannot be stated without some form of language. Harris certainly supposes so when he presumes to have demonstrated "that our beliefs are tightly coupled to the structure of language and to the apparent structure of the world."<sup>59</sup>

Given that restriction, how are we to account for the acquisition of language in the first place? A simple proposition, such as "the vegetable is green," depends on the association of the word "vegetable" with the object referred to, and the word "green" with a descriptor that may (or may not) pertain to that object. But the association that allows us to identify the object as a vegetable is, itself, a belief. That becomes clear when someone challenges us on it by telling us that what we have thought of as "vegetables" are not, after all, vegetables; tomatoes, as it turns out, are actually a variety of fruit. That necessarily changes our propositional attitude: the vegetable is not, after all, green; the fruit is. The difficulties grow more pronounced when are told that the color we were taught to think of as "green" is, in fact, red.

That example is meant to suggest that propositional attitudes are necessarily founded on beliefs that cannot themselves be formed by the evaluation of propositions. Our earliest linguistic battery cannot be acquired propositionally. We take this object to be a vegetable not because we considered the proposition that vegetables are a kind of edible plant matter – we could not very well evaluate the truth of that proposition without a prior battery of words – but because the association proved useful. A dissenting philosopher could argue that, because language is instrumental rather than genuinely descriptive, it makes more sense to suppose we acquire it as though we were evaluating the proposition "*that* thing is what others understand and mean by *this* word." Indeed, it may be useful in some contexts to translate the belief into that proposition, but it tells us more about what beliefs are and how they function to consider how they actually form. Naming is an activity of some interest to the last century of philosophical inquiry,<sup>60</sup> but I think it can be reasonably asserted, without prejudging the value of those inquiries, that we do not acquire a primary

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<sup>59</sup> *TEoF*, 71

<sup>60</sup> Cf. esp. *Naming and Necessity*, Saul Kripke (Harvard:1972)

language propositionally, nor do we treat it provisionally, but rather as an investment of belief.

What I am suggesting – and it would be beyond the scope of this essay to do more than suggest – is that beliefs are better understood as the association of ideas. Stating a proposition is one way of associating ideas, but by no means the only. The role of belief in language acquisition suggests that propositional attitudes represent a higher order of complexity, since they can only be formed on the basis of the prior beliefs encompassed by the language in which those propositions are stated and understood. In order to form a belief, then, all that is needed are two ideas and a cognitive bridge between them.

That cognitive bridge need not be especially precise at the point of formation. It can be given the precision of a propositional attitude later on, and that, for the most part, is what I mean when I say that beliefs may be translated into propositions. For example, the association of two ideas may be honed by confronting the believer with the need for action. A person who, when faced with an emergency, must count upon a friend in order to resolve the crisis, may suddenly, without their ever before having thought about it in propositional terms, realize that they believe their friend to be untrustworthy. The association of ideas was always there, but until that moment there had never been an occasion to make it, so to speak, propositional. That example shows how Harris' account may again have gotten the order of events backwards: here is it the action that entails the belief, and not vice versa.

Granting those premises draws into question the relationship insisted upon by Harris between knowledge and belief. Contrary to most of what he has argued heretofore, I would suggest that there is a class of beliefs that do not aspire to the status of knowledge, and that such beliefs belong no less to the category of belief than beliefs "in the epistemic sense." This is to say that we do, after all, generate beliefs that overreach our epistemic potential, and that doing so can, and often does, benefit us. Temperament may not only, as suggested before, play a part in how we translate belief into action, but also in how we form the beliefs whereby we act. For example, we may form beliefs that are, to some extent, either pessimistic or optimistic, in accordance to our own dispositions. Such beliefs may be described as an estimate of the probability of a favorable outcome, especially where our epistemic limitations make an impracticable doubt or a total and incapacitating suspension of judgment the only strictly logical conclusion.

Functionally, those beliefs which do aspire to the status of knowledge may ultimately belong to a subset of those that do not, rather than an altogether distinct class. That follows from a set of premises that *The End of Faith*, often only at the cost of contradicting itself, deliberately but

unconvincingly evades. The first is that knowledge is a species of belief, distinguished less by the sort of mental activity that goes into each than by the discourse with which we surround each. On that account, the truly substantive difference between believing that  $e=mc^2$  and knowing that  $e=mc^2$  lies merely in whether or not we treat the belief as corresponding to fact. The second premise is that all belief originates in subjective mental states; or, put another way, that a mind is a necessary condition for the generation of beliefs. It becomes, then, necessary to consider what sort of thing a mind is.<sup>61</sup>

For our present purpose, the salient characteristic of a mind is its status as a closed system. The mind never operates on the direct objects of experience, but rather on the content of the mind itself. The intimations of the world that we receive from the senses are, at best, translations from a foreign text.<sup>62</sup> It would be difficult to overstate the significance of the closed nature of that system; indeed, its acceptance makes the first premise all but logically necessary, since what then could knowledge be but a species of belief? On the basis of those premises, it becomes possible to construct a viable alternative to Harris' view, one in which belief is constrained not by its correspondence to an objectively verifiable state of the world, but rather by the epistemic limitations that arise a consequence of our innate subjectivities.

To say that the world is innately logical is much the same as saying that the world is innately visual, or tactile, or auditory; it may only seem so because it is by those senses that we have come to know the world in the first place. While it seems to us that we are touching the desk, modern physics tells us that what feels like direct contact is actually not contact at all, but rather the force of electrical charges repelling one another on the atomic level. Touch, as we understand it, is an experience existing only in the mind. Humans necessarily perceive the world according to human faculties, and logic is one such faculty. Could we perceive the world from some wholly different perspective, then we might be astonished to learn that the logic by which we think about the world is no less subjective and specific to human nature than are our other senses.<sup>63</sup> That may not be the

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<sup>61</sup> Both premises are given fuller acknowledgment in *The Moral Landscape* – indeed, Harris adapts the second as the basis for much of his moral argument. Nevertheless, both are there framed so as to evade the consequences that seem to follow from them.

<sup>62</sup> Jacob Bronowski has written elegantly on this theme; cf. esp. *The Origins of Knowledge and Imagination*, as well as *Science and Human Values*.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. *On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason*, Arthur Schopenhauer (1813).



account of belief and knowledge that we would prefer, but it does subject us less to the torturous contradictions and ambiguities of Harris' account.

What do these considerations mean in the context of religious belief? I have suggested that beliefs form through the association of ideas; that those associations need not be strictly logical or even propositional; that they may also form as the consequence of other considerations, such as practical necessity, temperament, or allogical association. It is probable that much of the content of religious belief forms in some such same way. If those modes of formation are, in fact, as characteristic of belief as propositional evaluation – if, that is to say, they inform much of what we believe in general, even to the point of serving as the foundation for language acquisition – then the fact that they also inform religious belief is not, in and of itself, sufficient ground on which to build a categorical objection against them.



One curious consequence of Harris argument is that it requires him to vouch for the sincerity of beliefs he does not, and presumably would not, endorse. Where he can successfully draw a plausible connection between such professions of belief and widely condemnable behavior, we find less reason to question his scrupulous credulity. Given both bin Laden's profession of belief in the divine favor bestowed on martyrs, *and* his involvement in suicide bombing campaigns, it is at least plausible that his behavior is, in fact, the direct causal result of those beliefs. In principle, then, some capacity for tracing such connections ought to be possible, even if it is granted that the causal effect of belief on behavior is only partial, or is modified by temperament. But it stretches that already tenuous principle to gainsay the professed beliefs of all religious believers who do not engage in extremist politics or violent resistance. The basic rhetorical strategy of Harris' account is to generalize from the seemingly inarguable cases, like bin Laden, to the less clear-cut examples of mundane religious belief.

In other words: Dennett is right in arguing that, "When it comes to interpreting religious avowals of others, *everybody is an outsider*."<sup>64</sup> He means that profession of a belief is not always a reliable indication of what the person actually believes. In that sense, Dennett and Harris represent opposite poles of credulity. Harris argues that we can understand religion only by taking at face value what the most troublesome religious adherents profess to believe; Dennett, that not only can we not take such professions at face value, but that we understand religion best by assuming that they are

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<sup>64</sup> *BtS*, 239

all motivated by an implicit and ulterior motive: belief in belief.<sup>65</sup> But that outsider status is hardly exclusive to religious belief, as Dennett's account might suggest; it applies equally well, for example, in the sphere of politics. Nearly the entire category of abstract belief proves vulnerable, including many of the sort of beliefs that Dennett himself espouses elsewhere, such as a belief in determinism.<sup>66</sup> Ultimately, we are outsiders even with respect to a belief like "the vegetable is green." By Dennett's standard, it overreaches our epistemic limits to assert anything more than that the subject believes that it is good to believe that the vegetable is green. It is a direct plunge from there, down the rabbit hole of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

The more marked emphasis on profession of belief gives *Breaking the Spell* a complexity largely absent from the account given by Harris. It may not overstate the case to suggest that "belief in belief" – Dennett's formula for the endorsement of beliefs not necessarily believed by the endorser – stands at the center of his assessment of organized religion.<sup>67</sup> Consider how Dennett introduces the chapter on belief in belief: "The preceding chapters have laid some new foundations for this inquiry, but also uncovered some problems besetting it that need to be addressed before any effective confrontation between theism and atheism can take place."<sup>68</sup> That forms, so far as I can tell, the first serious break in his carefully maintained posture of neutrality: his first acknowledgment that *Breaking the Spell* is intended to stage such a confrontation. The seven preceding chapters served primarily to lay the foundations for the argument that follows. On his typically evolutionary account, "the robustness of the institution of religion doesn't depend on uniformity of *belief* at all; it depends on the uniformity of *professing*."<sup>69</sup>

That argument has at least one significant consequence for the scientific inquiry into science: it allows Dennett to shift the emphasis in research away from the role of the personal to the role of the social. In doing so, he presents himself as rescuing the study of religion from the "pre-emptive disqualification" by which, he insists, academics sympathetic to religion have sought to protect it.<sup>70</sup> Those include such scholars as the sociologist Émile Durkheim, the historian of religion Mircea Eliade, and the cultural

<sup>65</sup> Despite that stark divide, they push those arguments towards surprisingly consistent political ends; see "The Irrigious Right"

<sup>66</sup> Cf. eg. *Freedom Evolves* (Viking:2003)

<sup>67</sup> For Dennett's distinction between folk and organized religions, cf. "The Taxonomy of Religion."

<sup>68</sup> *BtS*, 200

<sup>69</sup> *BtS*, 224

<sup>70</sup> *BtS*, 258-264

anthropologist Clifford Geertz. Dennett does not condescend to consider their evidence, preferring instead to speculate on their motives. "What is transparent in all these claims," goes his dismissal, "is that they are not so much defeatists as protectionist: don't even try, because we're afraid you might succeed!"

In opposing "the scholarly friends of religion," Dennett professes to be preserving "straightforward inquiry into the nature of religion" by confronting the argument that "we can never understand one another." It seems unlikely that the scholars he names had any such idea in mind. Far from having argued that, as Dennett's analogy would have it, "You'll never understand Indian street magic if you're not an Indian born into the caste of magicians," they seem to be arguing for a kind of provisional sympathy, one that seeks to see religious behavior from the viewpoint of the religious and, in doing so, better address religion, in accord with Dennett's program, as a phenomenon. So it is, at the very least, curious that he should feel it necessary to rebuff them. "They do want to study religion," he admits, "but only *their way*" – as though he was not likewise insisting on *his way* to the exclusion of others. How else are we to understand him when he argues that, "A social historian or an anthropologist who knows a great deal about the beliefs and practices of people all around the world but is naïve about evolution" is as unlikely to "frame the issues well" as an "evolutionary biologist or a psychologist who knows only one religion at all well and has a smattering of (mis)information about the others"?<sup>71</sup> Meanwhile, he does not hesitate to play the victim: "Anyone who tries to bring an evolutionary perspective to bear on any item of human culture, not just religion, can expect rebuffs ranging from howls of outrage to haughty dismissal," presumably of just the sort he levels against Durkheim, Eliade and Geertz.

The real conflict between Dennett and those scholars arises over Dennett's own canalization of the issue of belief. So that there is no mistake, my suggestion here is that, far from dispelling an "academic smoke screen," as he would have it, Dennett is seeking to undermine one approach to the study of religion in order to promote another, and specifically one that favors a confrontation between theism and atheism. Judging by the figures he has named, an epithet like "the scholarly friends of religion" may be taken to mean those for whom the question of what religion is, and of how it works, takes logical priority over the question of what we should do about it. Eliade's methodological axiom, that "A religious phenomenon will only be recognized as such if it is grasped at its own level," can be interpreted to mean only that the most important indicator of what makes religion a distinct phenomenon, worthy of special attention, is the value invested in it

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<sup>71</sup> *BtS*, 104

by the religious.<sup>72</sup> If religious adherents value certain beliefs, then the beliefs themselves must be taken seriously – not necessarily as propositional attitudes, but certainly as subjects for study.

In place of all those multivalent beliefs, Dennett substitutes the single, fungible value of belief in belief. Via that formula, he has not, as he seems to think, set aside the issue of belief, but rather reduced it to a single, elastic unit of exchange. The broad range of beliefs examined in the almost 100 years of research spanning from Durkheim to Geertz are thereby monetized and converted into tokens of profession: their content stripped away, their meaning reduced to memetic proliferation. What they mean (if anything) and how they function (if at all) ceases to matter. The only question that need be asked of them is, what motivates the individual to *profess* them? Dennett's answer will always be, "belief in belief." Indeed, given the principle that we are always outsiders, no other answer could be comprehensible. Were any of them alive to defend their positions, the scholars he so easily dismisses might argue that such monetization of belief qualifies as a "greedy reductionism," to borrow Dennett's term, particularly to the extent that it beguiles us to "underestimate the complexities, trying to skip whole layers or levels of theory in their rush to fasten everything securely and neatly to the foundation."<sup>73</sup>

It remains true that the nature of human subjectivity precludes our definitively distinguishing what any given subject sincerely believes from what they merely profess to believe. But it does not follow that belief in belief can reliably account for all significant features of religious belief, organized or otherwise. Dennett's formula functions in part to simply reduce the number of elements that count as significant features since, once granted, it sweeps away any feature related to belief, save for its profession.

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<sup>72</sup> quoted in *BtS*, 259. Dennett cites *Myth and Reality*, (Harper & Row:1963) as the source, but I can find there no trace of the quotation. Rather, the original source appears to be the foreword to *Patterns of Comparative Religion* (Sheed & Ward:1958). Far from denying Dennett's evolutionary perspective, his point appears to be only that study ought to begin at the scale at which a given phenomenon takes on substance. Thus: "I do not mean to deny the usefulness of approaching the religious phenomenon from various different angles; but it must be looked at first of all in itself, in that which belongs to it alone and can be explained in no other terms." (xvii.) To illustrate how even a scientific approach can distort phenomenon when it views them from the wrong scale, he quotes Henri Poincare's analogy asking whether "a naturalist who had studied elephants only under the microscope would think he knew enough about those animals?"

<sup>73</sup> *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, Daniel Dennett (Simon & Schuster:1995) p. 82

Our outsider status with respect to the beliefs of others means that the approach of looking to believers in order to determine the real content of religion can never aspire to statistical precision or absolute certainty. Nevertheless, advocates of that approach may have greater cause to suggest that Dennett's alternative is, itself, less defeatist than it is protectionist.

He has, in strategic and rhetorical terms, much to lose. A central suggestion of this essay is that the use to which Dennett and Harris (and to a lesser degree, Dawkins and Hitchens) have put belief and its epistemic cognates is primarily discursive. At certain points, they each deny that discursive intent, as when Dennett writes that the idea driving his book "is not to bulldoze people with science, but to get them to see that things they already know, or could know, have implications for how they should want to respond to the issues under discussion."<sup>74</sup> Just how that differs from bulldozing them is unclear. He, more than most of his fellow Horsemen, is willing to admit that, "we must arrive at questions about ultimate values, and no factual investigation could answer them. Instead, we can do no better than to sit down and reason together, a political process of mutual persuasion and education that we can try to conduct in good faith."<sup>75</sup> The recognition that the process has a significantly political component marks a first step towards actually conducting that discussion in good faith, but he does not let it stand for long. Where there is disagreement, he cajoles the opposition to "discuss it calmly and openly, with no untrumpable appeals to the sacred, which have no place in such discussion"<sup>76</sup> – unless, of course, they are *his* sacred values, "democracy, justice, life, love and truth (in alphabetical order)," which are, on his account, "obvious and quite ecumenical."<sup>77</sup> Wherever the topic recurs in *Breaking the Spell*, it is to those ideals, particularly truth and democracy, that Dennett appeals when he hopes to silence dissent.

One way that Dennett mitigates the values in which the other side of the discussion are necessarily grounded is by rapidly elevating belief in belief to the status of an explanatory principle. That principle explains, for example, "the historic processes by which polytheism turned into monotheism" by motivating "the migration of the concept of God in the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) away from concrete anthropomorphism to ever more abstract and depersonalized concepts."<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> *BtS*, 378

<sup>75</sup> *BtS*, 14

<sup>76</sup> *BtS*, 336

<sup>77</sup> *BtS*, 23

<sup>78</sup> *BtS*, 205; see "Covert Theology" for more on the short shrift given to polytheism by Dennett and Dawkins.

There is, then, no need to consider what the difference between monotheism and polytheism might mean to the believer, nor what part that belief plays in their involvement in the political process. All that matters to Dennett is that it has allowed them to evade the sort of criticism he would like leverage against both. Belief in belief allows him to assert explanations of that sort to the exclusion of all other possibilities. That takes on a particular significance when the subject turns from the historical development of religion to the active religious observance of people who can respond to direct inquiry concerning their beliefs and motives.

To that end, there is the paper "Preachers who are not Believers,"<sup>79</sup> which Dennett co-authored with Linda LaScola, a clinical social worker who operates a commercial market research group, LaScola Qualitative Research. The paper purports to divulge information from interviews with active clergy members who are "closeted nonbelievers,"<sup>80</sup> but questions of categorization arise almost immediately. Interviewees were solicited to discuss "the issues that clergy face when their beliefs are not in synch with church teachings,"<sup>81</sup> but it is unclear from the paper how Dennett and LaScola identified the six chosen interviewees as non-theists. Only five of the six interviewed are presented in the paper, as the sixth "had a change of heart," and "at her request, all further references to her and quotations from her interviews have been removed."<sup>82</sup> Of the four men approached who declined to be interviewed, two specifically cited concerns about the term "non-believing. Though neither believed in a supernatural god, both strongly self-identified as believers."<sup>83</sup> That would seem blatantly contradictory, unless the qualifier "supernatural" indicates that it was Dennett's criteria for theism, as spelled out in *Breaking the Spell*, to which they objected. "If what they call God," Dennett tells us there, "is really *not* an agent in their eyes, a being that can *answer* prayers, *approve* and *disapprove*, *receive* sacrifices, and *mete out* punishment or forgiveness, then, although they may call this Being God, and stand in awe of *it* (not *Him*), their creed, whatever it is, is not really a religion according to my definition."<sup>84</sup> The possibility that Dennett's definition formed the paradigm by which the interviews were judged is made more distinct by the paper's analysis of their objection:

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<sup>79</sup> Tufts University:2010

<sup>80</sup> "Preachers who are not believers," 1

<sup>81</sup> *ibid.* 2

<sup>82</sup> *ibid.* 1

<sup>83</sup> *ibid.* 2

<sup>84</sup> *BtS*, 10

But what do they mean by this? Are they perhaps deceiving themselves? There is no way of answering, and this is no accident. The ambiguity about who is a believer and who is a nonbeliever follows inexorably from the pluralism that has been assiduously fostered by many religious leaders for a century and more: God is many different things to different people, and since we can't know which of these conceptions is the right one, we should honor them all. This counsel of tolerance creates a gentle fog that shrouds the question of belief in God in so much indeterminacy that if asked whether they believe in God, many people could sincerely say that they don't know what they are being asked.<sup>85</sup>

This suggests an unwillingness of Dennett's part to recognize the plurality of theologies espoused by the paper's subjects. That further implies the supposition on his part of a fixed theological background that can be brought to bear as a single, definable criteria. After all, Dennett and LaScola claim to have successfully identified five clergy-members who do not believe in god; and this despite the insistence of three of the subjects that they do, in fact, believe. How could Dennett credibly suggest that they are "deceiving themselves" or that their collective protest "shows how powerfully the phenomenon of belief *in belief* figures in our lives"<sup>86</sup> unless he already has in mind some criteria for determining whether or not the "something" they espouse qualifies as a god? The implication seems to be that Dennett and LaScola know what their interviewees mean by god even better than do the professed theists themselves. But a section entitled "A Problem of Definition" does nothing to cast light on the subject, and the criteria remains covert.<sup>87</sup>

The accusation can no longer be avoided, that Dennett and Harris have both favored their given diagnostics of belief less because they are manifest in our experience of belief than because doing so makes possible the sort of confrontations with religious belief that Dennet (at least) hopes to stage. By his account of the role of viral memetics in the origin of religious belief,<sup>88</sup> Dennett all but excises the role of individual volition from his inquiry. The formula "belief in belief" allows him to further reject from consideration the content of religious belief, even as he implicitly reiterates Harris' premises

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<sup>85</sup> "Preachers who are not believers," 2

<sup>86</sup> *ibid.* 3; cf. "The Diagnostics of Belief" for more on Dennett's notion of "belief in belief."

<sup>87</sup> To which end, see "Covert Theology."

<sup>88</sup> See "The Flattening of Historical Perspective" and "Covert Theology."

concerning the role of those beliefs in motivating violence.<sup>89</sup> A paper like “Preachers who are not believers” depends for its logical argument on premises that allow Dennett to assert that validity of his interpretation over the claims of the subjects themselves. In answer to anyone who dares question his conclusions, he can always simply invoke belief in belief – of course *they* object, since they, also, are out to protect religion from inquiry. Any objection is thus surreptitiously converted into *a priori* evidence that the person objecting has an ulterior motive. In the end, the uses to which he puts belief in belief serve to draw across his argument just the sort of impenetrable veil that he continually harangues the “stewards” of religious belief and the “scholarly friends of religion” for having drawn across the phenomenon of religion.



In some regards, Harris’ account resembles the attempts of 20<sup>th</sup> century logical positivists to disqualify entire categories of common language as meaningless, on grounds that they could not be satisfactorily parsed in the propositional syntax best suited to formal logic.<sup>90</sup> In sum, “we are no more free to believe whatever we want about God than we are free to adopt unjustified beliefs about science or history, or free to *mean* whatever we want when using words like ‘poison’ or ‘north’ or ‘zero.’”<sup>91</sup> The statement hints at the polemical purpose to which Harris, and to some extent the Four Horsemen as a group, bend their analyses of the subject. Their treatment of the nature of belief serves as a means of constraining belief. Treating belief as through it were assimilable, without any loss of meaning, to the propositional attitude allows Harris to argue that it must be, literally *by nature*, logically consistent.

He has finally drawn close to the heart of his argument when he attempts to illustrate the principle that, “We can believe a proposition to be true *only* because something in our experience, or in our reasoning about the world, actually speaks to the truth of the proposition in question.”<sup>92</sup> The question of why a theist believes in God “invites – indeed, demands – an answer of the form ‘I believe that God exists because...’” Harris couples that with the

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<sup>89</sup> Cf. e.g. his discussion of the destruction of the World Trade Center: *BtS*, 257.

<sup>90</sup> The classical statement of logical positivism in this respect is A. J. Ayer’s *Language, Truth and Logic* (Gollancz, 1936).

<sup>91</sup> *TEoF*, 51

<sup>92</sup> *TEoF*, 62



premises described above to insist that a belief be grounded in an objective state of the world; to insist, in other words, that the belief aims at “representing our knowledge.” By insisting the central concern of any given belief is its correspondence to “some state of the world,” he implies that all belief aspires to the status of knowledge. The philosophical context of that scheme is Plato’s second analysis, that knowledge is true belief, an analysis that Plato ultimately presents Socrates as having rejected.<sup>93</sup> Harris not only revives the correlation, but subjects it to an implicit teleology. The causal aspect of such explanation, “explains the value we place on evidence,” on Harris’ view, “because evidence is simply an account of the causal linkage between states of the world and our beliefs about them.”

Harris’ willingness to glide past the complications and to overlook the contradictions of his own account give reason to suppose that he has affirmed the propositions stated in “The Nature of Belief” less for their connection to some observable “state of the world,” than because their acceptance seems to logically compel a particular “propositional attitude” towards religion. In brief, “religious beliefs, to be beliefs about the way to world *is*, must be as evidentiary in spirit as any other.” In order to wring from that attitude the program of action he recommends, he must insist that those other beliefs are, after all, uniformly evidentiary in spirit – or, at least, that belief, as the affirmation of a proposition, intrinsically aspires towards knowledge. The alternative account of belief given above suggests otherwise. In principle, Harris’ claim that human reason ultimately cannot be divorced from the objective behavior of the world may seem accessible, but given the vague form in which he presents it, practical applications prove out of the question. It seems meant only to assert, without demonstration, that some beliefs are, after all, objectively justified, even if we have no way of objectively verifying them. Indeed, the notion that certain forms of belief are impermissible may be taken as the principle theme of *The End of Faith*, as when Harris confides that his “goal in writing this book has been to help close the door on a certain style of irrationality.”<sup>94</sup> To the degree that all four would endorse something like Harris’ emphasis on the transcendent value of the logical, it is no surprise that all Four Horsemen are inclined to mobilize at the least suggestion of such relativism.<sup>95</sup>

Moreover, the suggestion that belief circumvents human autonomy by virtue of its direct and automatic causal relationship to behavior is

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<sup>93</sup> *Theaetetus*,

<sup>94</sup> *TEoF*, 223; cf. also “The Irreligious Right” for some of the practical means by which Harris and company propose to do so.

<sup>95</sup> See “Landscapes and Zeitgeists” for more on that theme.

characteristic of the use to which Harris puts his diagnosis. “The link between belief and behavior raises the stakes considerably,” he writes, and raising the stakes seems to have been very much the point. “Certain beliefs,” he argues,

place their adherents beyond the reach of every peaceful means of persuasion, while inspiring them to commit act of extraordinary violence against others. There is, in fact, no talking to some people. If they cannot be captured, and they often cannot, otherwise tolerant people may be justified in killing them in self-defense.

Put more bluntly, “Some propositions are so dangerous that it may even be ethical to kill people for believing them.”<sup>96</sup>

In a document entitled “Response to Controversy,”<sup>97</sup> Harris laments that, “Some critics have interpreted [that statement] to mean that I advocate simply killing religious people for their beliefs. Granted, I made the job of misinterpreting me easier than it might have been, but such a reading remains a frank distortion of my views.” Be that as it may, he does not swerve from the premises that seem to entail that conclusion. “The fact that belief determines behavior is what makes certain beliefs so dangerous,” he writes.

When one asks why it would be ethical to drop a bomb on Osama bin Laden or Ayman Al Zawahiri, the answer cannot be, ‘because they have killed so many people in the past.’ These men haven’t, to my knowledge, killed anyone personally. However, they are likely to get a lot of innocent people killed because of what they and their followers believe about jihad, martyrdom, the ascendancy of Islam, etc.

Note the distinction between “killing someone personally” and “getting someone killed.” Harris writes as though, in the absence of dangerous beliefs, the fact of their not having killed anyone directly would be decisive, but the third sentence contradicts that implication – as, for that matter, does Harris’ stated opposition to the death penalty. In the end, he does not attempt to justify killing bin Laden or Al Zawahiri on grounds that they

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<sup>96</sup> *TEoF*, 52-53

<sup>97</sup> [http://www.samharris.org/site/full\\_text/response-to-controversy2/](http://www.samharris.org/site/full_text/response-to-controversy2/) Version 1.8 (August 11, 2008)

already have gotten people killed, but rather that their beliefs likely will get people killed.

The simplest test of that rationale is to consider a scenario in which the prospective targets' beliefs were unknown. Imagine a rogue general who has, on several occasions and at regular intervals, ordered his army to kill civilians, but who has professed no beliefs that might explain his motives for doing so. With the present interval rapidly drawing to a close would Harris reserve judgment on the ethics of killing our hypothetical general until some assessment of the general's belief can be made? Or would past behavior suffice to justify a pre-emptive strike against him? Most would consider the pattern of behavior sufficient cause, and despite his arguments with respect to bin Laden and al Zawahiri, I think it likely that Harris would agree. He might, if he hoped to preserve the status of belief, argue that, in light of that pattern, we would be justified in assuming the existence of some belief sufficiently pernicious to inspire the massacres, but that seems to me both unnecessary and question begging. The pattern itself is sufficient to justify intervention, and the nature of the crime may be called upon to determine what degree of force, if any, is ethical.

What, then, is added when we point to the profession of belief? If it is ethical to drop bombs on bin Laden and Al Zawahiri, the justification should be that they have already established a pattern of complicity in the murder of innocents. Without that circumstance, what they profess to believe "about jihad, martyrdom, the ascendancy of Islam, etc." should be immaterial. Harris points to the role the pattern of the behavior plays in the judgment, but either fails or simply refuses to recognize its importance.

The reason, it seems, lies in his prior commitment to the idea that we automatically "become behaviorally susceptible" to the content of our beliefs. Harris may not have deliberately advocated "simply killing religious people for their beliefs," but he has, nevertheless, drawn a direct line from the proposition that "beliefs are principles of action" to a full justification for a literal war of ideas. By insisting on the irrelevance of bin Laden and al Zawahiri's prior involvement in terrorism, he even provides some justification for waging such wars preemptively. If our beliefs render us behaviorally susceptible, and if the process is automatic, then is the killing others for their beliefs not the necessary and inevitable effect of believing what Harris has written about belief? There are, I think, solid experiential reasons for supposing that belief does not, after all, function the way he supposes, but a reader who seriously commits to his account will not be likely to see them. And if you are willing to concede that it may be ethical to kill someone for their beliefs, how much more permissible is it to legislate against certain kinds of belief? Orwell coined a term for that sort of thing: *thoughtcrime*. He seems not to have thought very highly of it.

“Why,” Harris asks, “would someone as conspicuously devoid of personal grievances or psychological dysfunction as Osama bin Laden – who is neither poor, uneducated, delusional, nor a prior victim of Western aggression – devote himself to cave-dwelling machinations with the intention of killing innumerable men, women, and children he has never met?”<sup>98</sup> That presumes a great deal about bin Laden, without the benefit of ever having actually come into contact with the man, but Harris nevertheless calls the answer “obvious” – always a red flag. To call an explanation “obvious” means little more than that it requires no scrutiny; for that reason, it is often a cover for precisely those explanations that cannot stand up to scrutiny. “The answer,” he tells us,

is that men like bin Laden *actually* believe what they say they believe. They believe in the literal truth of the Koran. Why did nineteen well-educated, middle-class men trade their lives in this world for the privilege of killing thousands of our neighbors? Because they believed that they would go straight to paradise for doing so. It is rare to find the behavior of human beings so fully and satisfactorily explained. Why have we been reluctant to accept this explanation?

The best answer to the latter question, I would suggest, is that we are not convinced of the diagnostic account of belief he provides.

And yet, some might be inclined to take a permissive view of Harris’ account, telling ourselves that, insofar as he only applies it only to figures from the radical fringe of religious extremism, it has little to do with the rest of us. As it happens, Harris has an answer for that as well, and it takes little cognitive effort to use his arguments to connect the radicalism of an Osama bin Laden to the more common religious observance of our friends and neighbors. To illustrate, he writes:

Consider the following claim: *Starbucks does not sell plutonium*. I suspect that most of us would be willing to wager a fair amount of money that this statement is generally true – which is to say that we *believe* it. However, before reading this statement, you are very unlikely to have considered the prospect that the world’s most popular coffee chain might also trade in one of the world’s most dangerous substances. Therefore, it does not seem possible for there have been a structure in your brain that already corresponded to that belief. And yet you

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<sup>98</sup> *TEoF*, 28-29

clearly harbored some representation of the world that *amounts* to this belief.<sup>99</sup>

That argument contains two highly questionable premises that render it altogether dubious. The first is that it would be reasonable to regard belief as the mere potential for affirming a proposition. To make it clear why that premise should be regarded skeptically, it need only be asked whether you believed anything at all about the Starbucks' relationship to the plutonium market prior to have reading Harris' sentence. In all likelihood, the answer is no.

To cover against that skepticism, Harris introduces the second premise: that the potential for belief in a given proposition *amounts* to actual belief in that proposition. In saying so, he again insists that belief functions according to the same sort of entailment demanded by propositional logic. Again, experience shows that this simply is not the case. Because the structure of logical argument means that certain sets of propositions will, as a matter of logical necessity, entail certain conclusions, we are typically justified in treating the statement of those propositions as thought they amounted to the conclusions that follow from them. That is clearest in the pure grammar of mathematics, where it is virtually impossible to treat the phrase "the sum of two and two" as numerically distinct from the number four. But belief does not always – nor is it clear that it *should* always – adhere to the structure of propositional logic, much less mathematics. Our beliefs often stop short of entailing further beliefs, even when the beliefs we actually hold would, if presented as premises in a propositional argument, logically entail those second-order beliefs. *The End of Faith* suggests that the indeterminacy of those first-order beliefs represent a failure of our humanity, but there is no reason to take that standard as normative. Apart from his commitment to the ideology of Rationalism, what reason does Harris have for supposing that the human faculty for holding and dealing with belief is primarily evaluative, rather than creative? Certainly not observation of actual human behavior with respect to their beliefs.

The confusion in his formulation can be traced back to two distinct conceptions of belief that Harris uses as though they were interchangeable. The conception I called first-order in the preceding paragraph are beliefs as we actually find them in the mind. "Second-order beliefs," as I termed them, are beliefs only in the paradoxical sense that, though they may be implied when we translate first-order beliefs into propositional language – as a conclusion is implied by its premises – they are not actually held as beliefs. They exist not in the mind, but in the realm of the hypothetical. It

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<sup>99</sup> TML, 117

cuts through that confusion to say that so-called second-order beliefs are not really beliefs at all, and for the simple reason that they are not actively believed by the person holding the beliefs that would, once translated into propositional language, entail them. They are, at the very most, potential beliefs, though it is possible that they will never be realized in the mind.

Nevertheless, Harris insists that belief may be reasonably treated as the mere “disposition to accept a proposition as true (or likely to be).”<sup>100</sup> That logic can be readily turned against him, as I did when I suggested that his account of the mechanical nature of belief seems to obligate him to kill anyone with potentially dangerous beliefs. His suggestion that second-order beliefs could be treated as tantamount to first-order beliefs dangerously extends that principle. Unsurprisingly, Harris’s “Response to Controversy” resists that obligation, but it seems likely that his insistence on the status of second-order belief was motivated by the desire to obligate others to just that sort of consequence. By insisting that belief describes not only the association of ideas that a person actually makes, but also the associations that would necessarily arise were they to treat those beliefs as logical propositions, Harris makes it possible to treat a person as though they affirmed propositions that they might, in fact, never affirm. In effect, he is arguing for the authority to dictate to others what they believe *in effect*, even in direct contradiction to what they profess.

In the project to construct a diagnostic of belief that is, by virtue of its very structure, hostile to religion – a project one might suppose Harris has amplified in his neurological research<sup>101</sup> – this represents the final stand. Acceptance of Harris’ account allows the polemicist to attribute fundamentalist beliefs to even moderate religious observers, and to treat all religious belief as though it were equivalent to latent violence, only waiting to manifest. It thus becomes possible to construe all religious believers as embryonic bin Ladens, destined to emerge as fully formed extremists. I see no way around the conclusion that the Four Horsemen took up the topic of belief precisely for the purpose of identifying the worst behavior of religious extremists with the most innocuous religious beliefs of the rest of the population. It is to that end that the diagnostics of belief considered in this essay have, in every case, insisted upon the uniformity of religious belief. Ultimately, there can be no better demonstration of the weaknesses of that critique than the torturous distortions to which they have had to subject the concept of belief in order to achieve it.

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<sup>100</sup> *TML*, 118

<sup>101</sup> Cp. e.g. the conclusions drawn in “Functional neuroimaging of belief, disbelief and uncertainty,” Harris, Sheth and Cohen, *Annals of Neurology*, 63 (2), 141-147, to Harris’ interpretation of those findings in *TML*, esp. Ch. 3.

## THE TAXONOMY OF RELIGION

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NONE OF THE FOUR HORSEMEN provide a clear-cut definition of religion. The difficulty involved in doing so may explain why they have, on the whole, preferred to level their critiques against metonyms, like faith, theism, or “belief in belief.” What they have offered instead may be described as a series of gestures, circumscribing the subject without providing a defensible criteria for identifying religion *per se*. Rhetorically, that method has the advantage of allowing the critic to shift the ground beneath the discussion. Phenomena that most of us would recognize as religious are thus exonerated from criticism, while phenomena with no intrinsic claim to religious status are included, lending their guilt to religion by dubious association.

Consider the case of Buddhism. In a footnote, Harris argues that, “While Buddhism has also been a source of ignorance and occasional violence, it is not a religion of faith, or a religion at all, in the Western sense. There are millions of Buddhists who do not seem to know this, and they can be found in temples throughout Southeast Asia, and even in the West, praying to Buddha as though he were the numinous incarnation of Santa Claus.”<sup>1</sup> So much the better for Harris, who practices Buddhism and advocates for Buddhist practices in the last chapter of *The End of Faith*. If what distinguishes Harris’ Buddhism is that he does not regard the Buddha as comparable to “the numinous incarnation of Santa Claus,” that comparison would seem to put Harris in accord with Dawkins in viewing theism as the “factual premise of religion.” Some discussion of what distinguishes “the Western sense” of religion might have shed more light on the subject, but Harris goes no further than to suggest that there are two senses of the term, one less damnable than the other, without giving definition to either. That is

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<sup>1</sup> *TEoF*, 293 fn. 12

certainly no more surprising than that there are millions of Southeast Asians who have yet to be informed that they are practicing religion “in the Western sense” and have even managed to export it back to the West.

Though the notion of a fundamental division between Occidental and Oriental religions has been around at least since the 19<sup>th</sup> German scholars of religion, Harris’ proof is so awkward that the reader may be forgiven for wondering whether he has, in the end, condemned a club that has him a member. Hitchens proves charitable enough to pay lip service to the exoneration of Buddhism. “It can be argued,” he writes, “that Buddhism is not, in our sense of the word, a ‘religion’ at all.”<sup>2</sup> But perhaps he is after all only echoing the polite formula rehearsed by Dawkins<sup>3</sup> and faintly echoed by Dennett,<sup>4</sup> since the rest of his chapter takes the example of Buddhist violence as indicative of religion in general. That variance does little to inspire confidence in any definition that would exclude Buddhism from the religious category on *a priori* grounds.

At the other end of the spectrum stands modern totalitarianism. Here Harris and Hitchens are less at odds, as both regard the totalitarianisms of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as virtual religions. Yet without some explicit criteria for distinguishing religion from strictly political phenomena, well-constructed rhetoric can convert nearly any political movement into a religious one. Stanley Fish, a literary theorist and legal scholar, has shown the opposite side of that trend by remarking on “the religion of letting it all hang out, the religion we call liberalism.”<sup>5</sup> Coincidentally, he made that reference in the course of talking about the controversy brewed by the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*’s decision to print 40 cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammad; based on their response, the Four Horsemen would no doubt fit Fish’ description of practitioners of the religion of liberalism.

Both Fish and the Horsemen, characterized political stances as religious in order to weaken their standing. Fish proposes to put liberal dismissals of Muslim outrage into context, while Harris and Hitchens propose to reclassify negative examples of secularist/atheist societies to suit their own arguments. The conversion is possible because politics deals with the consequences of beliefs that are, as Dennett suggests, incommensurable. The first question behind any given political stance is not, “What are the facts?” but rather, “What issues do we regard most critical?” That the factual inquiry will almost always be preceded, and indeed guided, by the adoption of a faith, so to speak, seems to put politics in much the same

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<sup>2</sup> GING, 199

<sup>3</sup> TGD, 59

<sup>4</sup> BtS, 8

<sup>5</sup> “Our Faith in Letting It All Hang Out,” *New York Times*, February 12, 2006.



territory as religion. The Four Horsemen are not above that priority.<sup>6</sup> So long as there are no proper boundaries by which to distinguish religion from politics, they remain open to charges of have contributed to their own political religion.

For context, allow me to quote from Kingsley Martin's study of the reactions to France's *ancien regime*, the historical background to the Rationalist traditions adopted by the New Atheists:<sup>7</sup>

The old creed, which had been dominant under Louis XIV., was a lost cause at the fall of the Bastille; and the new creed, which had been shaping itself piecemeal in the minds of scientists and men of letters in the seventeenth century, had become a religion to the deputies who met in the States-General. For these revolutionary doctrines in their final form served all the purposes of a religion. Liberty, Equality and Fraternity were the new watchwords which embodied an ancient and continuous social ideal – a community of equal and free citizens, conscious of a common heritage and a common goal. At the Revolution this vision seemed closer to realization than it has at any other moment of history; men believed that they were in fact equal, and needed only to cast off their chains and to proclaim their common brotherhood. Their faith was upheld by a new metaphysic, an ethic, a series of dogmas and a means of grace. Science had substituted a natural for a supernatural explanation of the universe: knowledge, not obedience, was the gate of salvation; the key was held by men of science, the true priesthood, less exclusive intermediaries between man and the hidden mysteries of nature. Finally the doctrine of progress transformed the whole from a philosophy into a working faith: men could believe in the ultimate success of the causes for which they worked, since there were natural and historical forces greater than themselves working with them.

Like that of the *ancien regime* before it, that creed had a life span of its own, and Kingsley tells us that in the twentieth century, "its fundamental assumptions were shaken," and that "new knowledge and bewildering

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<sup>6</sup> See "The Irreligious Right."

<sup>7</sup> *French Liberal Thought in the Eighteenth Century: A Study of Political Ideas from Bayle to Condorcet*, (Ernest Benn Ltd:1929), 2-3. Quotations are from a revised edition (Harper Torchbooks:1963). See "The Heirs of *La Coterie Holbachique*" for a fuller description of that adoption.

experience have once more brought disillusion, scepticism and a paralysing sense of impotence.”

In calling that new creed a religion in its own right, Kingsley merely picks up some heavy-handed themes from French liberal thought itself. Several episodes suggest that the 18<sup>th</sup> century advocates expected their ideology not only to displace the religion of the *ancien regime*, but also to serve as a religion in its own right. Carl Becker, for example, tells us of the ransacking of the Notre Dame cathedral by the Cult of Reason, an atheistic substitute for Catholicism which was itself replaced by decree with Robespierre’s deistic Cult of the Supreme Being.<sup>8</sup> But there is little reason to interpret the French revolutionaries’ use of the term religion (nor that of Kingsley and Becker in following them) as diagnostic. They seem to have been less concerned with a universal definition of the phenomenon of religion than in providing a substitute for the role played by religion in propping up the *ancien regime*. The triumvirate of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity; the Cult of Reason; the Cult of the Supreme Being: these may have been creeds dressed in the trappings of religion in order to serve the function that religion had played prior to the Revolution, but that does not mean that they would pass as religion in another time or place.

I press that point in order to deflate the argument, made too often by their critics, that the Four Horseman have only put forward their own religion, and that their argument against religion in general is, therefore, either undermined by a fatal self-contradiction, or knowingly duplicitous. No such argument should be accepted on the basis of superficial resemblance alone. To say, for example, that the ideology of 18<sup>th</sup> century liberal atheism and deism should be classed a religion because it played the same role that Catholicism has previously filled is as fallacious as to say that, because religion has sometimes been the cause of war, *all* precipitate causes of war should likewise be thought of as religious. Rather, the process of defining religion, with as little bias as possible, should precede the act of declaring New Atheism a member of the family. That order of events proves particularly crucial when the point is to use categorization as a tool of rebuttal.

Unfortunately for their arguments, the New Atheists opened themselves up to such comparisons by insisting on the validity of that strategy. “Consider the millions of people who were killed by Stalin and Mao,” writes Harris: “although these tyrants paid lip service to rationality, communism was little more than a political religion.”<sup>9</sup> Hitchens makes much the same point in *God Is Not Great*, writing that, “Communist

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<sup>8</sup> *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century*, Carl Becker (1932).

<sup>9</sup> *TEoF*, 79

absolutists did not so much negate religion, in societies that they well understood were saturated with faith and superstition, as seek to *replace* it.”<sup>10</sup> In doing so, he suggests, they have restored the essential nature of religion in secular guise. Why, we might ask, could the same not be said of the New Atheists? The suggestion that they have simply repackaged religion becomes all the more credible when they are seen in light of the historical background from which they emerged. After all, the New Atheism has, by and large, repackaged the previously radical religious critique of the French Materialists and their philosophical brethren. If those ideological ancestors thought of themselves as replacing religion, by means precisely analogous to those Hitchens finds among the Communist absolutists, then should we not expect to discover in the New Atheists the survival of the Cult of Reason?

But, again, that line of reasoning inverts the proper order. Should we follow it to the end, we might find that we have backed into a definition of religion that makes irreligion and atheism conceptually impossible. Religion comes to mean any ideology that ties together belief, or the social order, and thus irreligion and atheism prove to be nothing more than species of religion. That may satisfy certain religious apologists who find it more agreeable to deny the very existence of irreligion, rather than acknowledge the existence of anything that might contradict their convictions, but surely even most apologists will agree that there are good reasons to want to preserve at least the possibility of rejecting theism and religion. At any rate, we cannot take the arguments of the Four Horsemen seriously if we do not accept at least the possibility of their unbelief and their irreligion.

The two examples given above, those of Buddhism and totalitarianism, indicate two criteria for determining the suitability of a definition. One is applicability – does the definition identify everything that we recognize as belonging to that category? The other is integrity – is the definition precise enough to preclude being stretched to the point of meaninglessness? A definition that would allow us to talk of the Democratic Party as a religion would lack integrity. One that excluded Rabbinic Judaism would be inapplicable. There are, of course, reasons for preferring definitions that lack for one criteria or the other, but that lack serve only to draw into question the motives for preferring them.

Dennett provides the closest to an explicitly stated definition of religion that the reader of the Four Horsemen can expect to get. “Tentatively,” he cautions, “I propose to define religions as *social systems whose participants avow belief in a supernatural agent or agents whose approval is to be*

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<sup>10</sup> GING, 246

sought.”<sup>11</sup> Yet he is quick to frame that as a tentative definition, subject to revision. *Breaking the Spell* never finds time to revisit it overtly, but certain rhetorical maneuvers that follow might logically entail its modification. I intend to make the case that Dennett relies more on an evolutionary description of religion, but since it proves, after all, to be the only definition on offer, it warrants further scrutiny. The statement can be divided into a number of clauses, identifying religion as (1) a social system consisting of (2) participants who (3) avow belief, specifically in (4) an agents or agents, the primary characteristic of whom is (5) that their approval is to be sought.

At the outset it may be noted that the second and third clauses put Dennett at some variance, both with his fellow Horsemen and, at times, with himself. That is because his account technically omits belief as an identifier of religion in favor of “participants” and “avowals.” A dead religion – that is, a religion which was no longer avowed – would, taking Dennett’s criteria literally, no longer be a religion at all. Most, I expect, would shrink from that conclusion; a religion that exists only in the historical record remains a religion, as far as most of us are concerned. As such, most people regard a religion, properly speaking, as the body of beliefs associated with a given tradition, and deem the question of whether or not anyone continues to avow those beliefs immaterial.

That certainly proves true in the case of the other Horsemen. Harris is particularly vocal in insisting that any avowed participants who do not actually believe in the explicit tenets of the creed are not actually religious. If we wished to drive a wedge between Dennett and Harris, we might conjure up the image of the perfect Crypto-Jew. Given a person who secretly believes the tenets of Judaism while publicly avowing the tenets of Islam, to which religion would we say she belongs? Given Dennett’s definition, and assuming that our hypothetical subject keeps their Jewish beliefs perfectly secret, she would be a Muslim. Given Harris’ less explicitly stated criteria, she would be a Jew. For what it is worth, she would, I suspect, consider herself a Jew, but would never openly identify herself as such. The extent to which Dennett is willing to advocate for his side of the dispute becomes clear in some of the research he has published since *Breaking the Spell*.<sup>12</sup>

Related problems arise with the first clause of his definition, that religions are social systems. How, for example, would Dennett characterize one of the subjects of Gershom Scholem’s “Religious Authority and Mysticism”?<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *BtS*, 9

<sup>12</sup> See “The Diagnostics of Belief” and “A Drawing of Lines” for discussion of Dennett and LaScola’s “Preachers who are not Believers.”

<sup>13</sup> Reprinted in *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism* (Schocken:1965)

In that essay, Scholem examines the process where by the well-known figure of the religious mystic develops their mystical vision in response to the credal formulas of recognized religious authorities. While the pronouncements of the mystic may go on to form the basis for a new religious society – as in the case of one of Scholem’s favorite topics, Isaac Luria – “Religious Authority and Mysticism” concerns itself with the mystic precisely at the moment in which they have detached themselves from the prevailing religious society. Does that mystic belong to a religion? Dennett’s criteria suggests that she would not. There can be no religion until someone else professes the mystic’s belief alongside her, just as there can be no chorus until someone accompanies the soloist. But what, then, has the mystic created? Whatever name we attach to it, we must regard it as purer than the religion of Dennett’s account.

It is not always clear whether or not the other Horsemen would endorse that criteria. Hitchens, for example, argues that, “it can be stated as a truth that religion does not, and in the long run cannot, be content with its own marvelous claims and sublime assurances. It *must* seek to interfere in the lives of nonbelievers, or heretics, or adherents of other faiths.”<sup>14</sup> That seems to suggest an inherent draw towards organization or, more to the point, social control. But because it presents the matter as a temptation inherent to religion, that premise at least leaves open the possibility that religion can be, in its earliest stages, solitary. While Harris’ argument “is aimed at the majority of the faithful in every religious tradition,” he leaves open the possibility that theologian Paul Tillich might constitute a “blameless parish of one.”<sup>15</sup> Perhaps that puts Harris across the table from Dennett, or maybe it is only a rhetorical flourish meant to gracefully dismiss Tillich. It bears some resemblance to Dawkins’ aside marking Bishop John Shelby Spong as “a nice example of a liberal bishop whose beliefs are so advanced as to be almost unrecognizable to the majority of those who call themselves Christians.”<sup>16</sup> In both cases, variance to the majority view serves as a pretext for ignoring a theologian to whom neither author seems to object very much. Dennett’s “social system” clause might thus appeal to them, but neither goes so far as to disqualify Tillich and Spong from the religious category on those grounds.

Then there is the matter of Dennett’s “agent or agents.” He clarifies by writing, “This is, of course, a circuitous way of articulating the idea that a

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<sup>14</sup> *GING*, 17

<sup>15</sup> *TEoF*, 65

<sup>16</sup> *TGD*, 269

religion without *God* or *gods* is like a vertebrate without a backbone.”<sup>17</sup> This raises the question of applicability, since there have been traditions that satisfy the earlier clauses, and historically have been regarded as religions, but which would fail to qualify under this clause. Among them are Samkhya Hinduism, perhaps Jainism, some schools of Buddhism, a small sect of atheist Christians, and so on. Dennett’s criteria would exclude them all, but more significantly his fifth clause threatens to further exclude large swaths of more or less orthodox religious groups. He clarifies, “If what they call God is really *not* an agent in their eyes, a being that can *answer* prayers, *approve* and *disapprove*, *receive* sacrifices, and *mete out* punishment or forgiveness, then although they may call this Being God, and stand in awe of *it* (not *Him*), their creed, whatever it is, is not really a religion according to my definition.”<sup>18</sup> Strict Taoism is out, then; as are some forms of Hinduism, modern theological versions of Christianity, and certain Jewish and Muslim mysticisms. Religion’s like Voudon come to inhabit a strange liminal space, since what they regard as God would be excluded, though the *lwa*, which are subordinate to God, would again mark the tradition as religious in nature. Some ancient (or, as Dennett prefers, “folk”) religions would presumably fail to meet his criteria, since the agents tend to be only tangentially related to religious practice, if at all. Significantly, pantheism and deism would be left out of account, despite both positing divinities. In the end, it can be difficult to calculate what remains of the groups that most of us would recognize as religious: certainly evangelical Christianity, orthodox Judaism and most mainline Islam, but what beyond that is difficult to guess. Those clauses also raise the question of his definition’s integrity. Does, for example, a gambler who regularly invokes the favor of Lady Luck necessarily belong to a religion? What about a paranoid who purports to see the working of “the Man” in every bad turn of events?

What Dennett has achieved by those last two clauses amounts to the rationalization of a bias that his fellow Horsemen have adopted more or less by default. They have, on the whole, preferred to focus on the Abrahamic traditions, and specifically on the most culturally conservative and rigidly doctrinaire sects. One pragmatic reason that they nearly all avow is familiarity: except for Harris’ experience with Buddhism, they all claim much more experience with Abrahamic religion. Only Hitchens breaks with that constraint to any significant degree, specifically in the chapter entitled “The Is No ‘Eastern’ Solution.” But their reasons also tend toward the programmatic, by which I mean that it sometimes serves their rhetorical

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<sup>17</sup> *BtS*, op cit.; it was, in large part, taxonomic analogies like this that inspired the title of this essay.

<sup>18</sup> *BtS*, 10

purposes to scrupulously exclude certain religious traditions. To that end, Harris excludes Buddhism to bolster his own atheist *bona fides*, and Dawkins excludes pantheism, deism and “Einsteinian religion” in order to maintain the *bona fides* of others, even in the face of their own religious avowals.<sup>19</sup> If we take the plain definition of theism as “belief in God or gods,” and if we also follow Dawkins in seeing theism as “the factual premise of religion,”<sup>20</sup> then deism and pantheism are clearly religious, or at least proto-religious, forms. The only way to evade that conclusion is to wrest control of the meaning of the word “god” from those who actually believe in gods, but in doing so the polemical atheists falsify their own attempts to circumscribe religion as a phenomenon.<sup>21</sup>

As a consequence of his insistence on a particular form of agency, it is not always clear what Dennett means when he uses a seemingly straightforward term like “Christian religion.” Does he mean only the Christians who unambiguously avow belief in an suitably immanent and personal God? If so, then how can the moderates who believe in God as a non-personal fount of being be held responsible, as Dennett argues they should,<sup>22</sup> for the behavior of those who are, on his account, genuinely religious? Such complications do not detain him, though he admits their potential to arise as a consequence of his definition. Or rather, he asserts that, “In order to get clear about what religions *are*, we will have to allow that some religions may have to be turned into things that aren’t religions any more.”<sup>23</sup> Rarely are any of the Horsemen so transparent in indicating their discursive method than Dennett is when he talks of turning religions “into things that aren’t religions any more.” Nixon pulled off a similar maneuver when he claimed, in effect, that in order to get clear about what his criminal record *is*, we will have to allow that some crimes may be turned into things that aren’t crimes any more.



Having drafted a definition (albeit a provisional and troublesome one) Dennett goes on to make very little use of it. More often, he treats and identifies religions much as the other Horsemen, who have not provided explicit definitions, treat and identify them. His historical distinction

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<sup>19</sup> See “A Drawing of Lines” for examples.

<sup>20</sup> *TGD*, 189

<sup>21</sup> The essay “Covert Theology” continues this theme.

<sup>22</sup> See “The Irreligious Right” for elaboration.

<sup>23</sup> *BtS*, 10

between folk and organized religions arises not from his definition, but rather as the result of a speculative account of the development of religion. On that account, folk religions arise first of all as the result of misfirings in the cognitive apparatus humans have evolved for interacting with the world. Eventually, a priestly class arises and claims for itself the role of steward, shaping and protecting the avowals originally formed in the crucible of folk religion until they become the doctrines of an organized religion. That progression represents a tangible break in Dennett's account, from what could be regarded as the mitochondrial phase of religion to the form in which we more commonly encounter it. It is sometimes unclear whether or not the folk traditions that he presents as the germ of organized religion would really qualify as religion according to his own definition. Since, for example, their status as folk traditions usually precludes any definite historical record, how can he be sure that avowal of belief in properly supernatural agents played a part? At best, he must extrapolate from the centrality of theism in modern organized religion, but that begs the question.

This suggests the scope of certain problems of identification that arise when we rely on the evolutionary account preferred by Dawkins and Dennett. Evolutionary explanation, especially as practiced by the school of biological thought represented by Dawkins, is statistical. Even the criteria that Dawkins' provided in *The Selfish Gene* for identifying the basic unit of evolution, the gene, does so by calculating averages. A gene is a gene by virtue of its survival over multiple replications. That is to say, we can only identify a discrete gene by recognizing identical patterns in the gene-bearer's ancestors or progeny over a number of generations. A gene is nothing in itself, and only takes on meaning and substance as part of a statistical persistence. When gauging "the meme's-eye view" espoused by Dawkins and especially by Dennett, it is important to remember that the meme is defined by analogy to Dawkins' method of defining the gene. In that light it suddenly becomes clear why Dennett's definition must insist on the social character of religion. His argument is cut adrift without it, since a meme takes on substance only over successive iterations, or replications as he would have it. Since there can be no meme without either progeny or ancestors, nor can he allow that there are any solitary religious believers.

Along with a certain amount of dubious explanatory power, the memetic explanations inherit from the gene certain liabilities. Those liabilities become especially clear in Dennett's extended account of the origins and development of religion. The essential point to bear in mind is that memetic explanation puts a premium on the survival of the things it seeks to explain. That proves significantly less worrisome in the case of biological functionalism, where, we are told, genetic mutations happen "not once in a



trillion copyings.”<sup>24</sup> When those mutations fail to overcome environmental pressures – when, that is, they significantly impede, or simply fail to differentially promote, the survival and reproduction of the gene-bearer – natural selection quickly expunges them from the gene pool. The swiftest of those extinctions would fail Dawkins’ selfish gene test. By failing to persist over multiple generations, they hardly earn the name gene. It matters little what they are if not genes; the point is only that the biologist need not devote much thought to them, since the field of genetics concerns itself almost exclusively with statistically significant strains.

Memes are, likewise, defined by the fidelity of their transmission, or at least by the capacity for fidelity. In truth, the “substrates” on which memes are transmitted lend themselves to a great deal more variability than the organic, physical substrate to which the gene is limited. As a consequence, most memes mutate at a much higher rate than “once in a trillion copyings.” The ease with which they can slip into variation may be illustrated by simple word of mouth, but such mutations need hardly be accidental.

The point is this: Precisely because genetic mutations are so rare, not much is lost by excluding from consideration those that never quite make it as genes in their own right. On the whole, evolutionary theory concerns itself very little with the isolated example. Its interest lies with the trend rather than the individual. But the inquiry into religious belief cannot help but direct us back to the individual, and indeed, both Dawkins and Dennett show themselves to be interested in the individual’s profession of belief. Such inquiries cannot afford to exclude the isolated example, as memetic theory does almost of necessity. Practices and belief that might otherwise qualify as religious fall out of view because they are not particularly “fit,” in the parlance of evolutionary explanation.

When we approach the history of religion from a perspective that values individual instances as highly as it does statistics, it becomes clear that the anomalies can have as much force as the trends. While the carefully managed orthodoxy of the medieval Catholic church was effective in preserving certain doctrines (or, if you like, memes) over the span of centuries, it did so only by applying persistent pressure against the continual emergence of heterodox beliefs and practices. Such heterodoxy did not cease to affect the lives of believers, nor the direction of history, simply because much of it died upon the vine. And because variation occurs at a much higher rate in culture than it does in biology, some features tend to pop up again and again, without the sort of direct transmission indicated by the term “replication.” Those features recur not because they are “Good Tricks,” but because the human mind permits variations that natural

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<sup>24</sup> *BtS*, 120

selection, operating over generations, would not. Memetic theory can do little with religious features that do not persist over generations, but that does not necessarily disqualify them from the category of religion.

In light of those criticisms, it may be better to say that, rather than accurately describing or defining religion, the account given by Dennett (and to a lesser extent, Dawkins), provides a taxonomy of certain religious features. It can, perhaps, help explain why certain traditions fare better than others; how (to provide a quite obvious example) certain restricted forms of celibacy can persist even though the strict celibacy of all adherents would constitute a severe obstacle to the long-term viability of a religion. That taxonomic procedure proves less capable of dealing with the lone religious believer who takes on strict celibacy as a private religious commitment. Such limitations prove critical, and justify taking Dennett's claims for the meme's-eye view with a heavy dose of salt. Ultimately, his inquiry may have more polemical than explanatory value. "Only when we can frame a comprehensive view of the many aspects of religion," he writes, "can we formulate defensible policies for how to respond to religions in the future."<sup>25</sup> The moment an author begins formulating political solutions to the problem of religion, it becomes all the more important to understand precisely what he takes that problem to be.

*God Is Not Great* returns to the religious a modicum of the deprived them in Dennett's and Dawkins' memetic accounts. If Hitchens is to be believed, "the mildest criticism of religion is also the most radical and the most devastating one. Religion is man-made."<sup>26</sup> He is notably less clear on why this should be so devastating. Certainly it provides stark contrast to the claims of those who hold that their religion originated with a theophany. It would, for example, contradict the creed of traditional Judaism for *God Is Not Great* to have put forward the argument (as it does not) that the Ten Commandments were actually drafted by human hands: if not the Moses of the Pentateuch, then some anonymous proto-Jew. There are, no doubt, fundamentalists of every major religious stripe who would argue that their own tradition bears the mark of divine stewardship, but few would seriously allege that no religion comes into being without its having been revealed, and there are many within each tradition who would gladly admit that the modern religious forms are the result of humans doing their best to capture some spark of the divine without ever knowing to what degree they have attained success. Hitchens' point ultimately proves to be less about provenance than about the grounds for belief. "And yet," he marvels, "the believers still claim to know! Not just to know, but to know *everything*."

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<sup>25</sup> *BtS*, 310

<sup>26</sup> *GING*, 10

That, surely, is overstating the case, but it does point to the taxonomy by which Hitchens seems to circumscribe the topic of religion. "Thanks to the telescope and the microscope," he writes towards the end of *God Is Not Great*, religion "no longer offers an explanation of anything important."<sup>27</sup> This takes it for granted that the function of religion is explanatory, as though it were clear that religion arose primarily as a means of generating true beliefs about literally mundane phenomena. The "four irreducible objections to religious faith" that Hitchens lists at the beginning of the book all hinge on that epistemic interpretation of the phenomenon of religion. They are:

that it wholly misrepresents the origins of man and the cosmos, that because of this original error it manages to combine the maximum of servility with the maximum of solipsism, that it is both the result of and cause of dangerous sexual repression, and that it is ultimately grounded on wish-thinking.<sup>28</sup>

Those last two objections speak to the influence of Freud's *The Future of an Illusion*. There, according to Hitchens, "Freud made the obvious point that religion suffered from one incurable deficiency: it was too clearly derived from our own desire to escape from or survive death."<sup>29</sup> So far as Hitchens is concerned, "This critique of wish-thinking is strong and unanswerable," and perhaps it would be, if it were at all clear that religion intrinsically provided an answer to the problem and riddle of death. Some religions certainly seem to do so, with their visions of Heaven or Paradise, or escape from the continual cycle of suffering. Others prove more ambivalent. Traditional Judaism, for example, provides no afterlife. The classical paganisms sometimes did, but the afterlives they described were often as unrelenting and devoid of hope as the promise of total annihilation. The Houses of the Dead in the Sumerian myth of Gilgamesh and Enkidu, for example, are gray, featureless spaces, in which the dead sit in ash with little or no awareness of the world they inhabit, nor the one from whence they came. Greek religion seems to have developed idyllic visions of the afterlife rather late in its development, but in the *Odyssey* the *eidola* of even

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<sup>27</sup> *GING*, 282

<sup>28</sup> *GING*, 4; the grammatical formula "combines the maximum of x with the maximum of y," which Hitchens seems to have adapted from George Bernard Shaw's judgment on marriage, is one to which he resorts more than once, exemplifying a fondness for hyperbole. Cf. also *GING*, 232.

<sup>29</sup> *GING*, 103

the semi-divine heroes survive death as mere shades, and take on vitality only during the brief interval in which Odysseus provides them with the spilt blood of ritually prepared heifers. Such visions are difficult to reconcile with the premise that religion develops as a form of wish-fulfillment.

One may, perhaps, be forgiven for supposing that Freud has read too much of his own psychoanalytic theory into religious history; or that Hitchens has succumbed to the same impulse that leads young Marxists to see universal history as the fulcrum of an Archimedian lever. Both thereby streamline the complications that prevail when religion is actually encountered in the world. The largely *a priori* suggestion that religion explains the world and fulfills deep-seated human urges, all by the same sleight-of-hand, allows Hitchens to maintain the criticism that religion is necessarily at odds with other forms of human inquiry. Not only that, but religion also seeks, as a result of its artificiality, to impose its beliefs on others. "It is, after all," he explains, "wholly man-made. And it does not have the confidence of its own various preachings even to allow coexistence between different faiths."<sup>30</sup> Why this should not also be true of other man-made beliefs remains unclear.

There are, in fact, notable exceptions. When, for example, Hitchens assures us that "religion has always hoped to practice upon the unformed and undefended minds of the young, and has gone to great lengths to make sure of this privilege by making alliances with secular powers in the material world,"<sup>31</sup> he has apparently ignored the example of the Greco-Roman mystery religions, whose initiations typically barred instruction to all but the adult. He seems to be thinking mostly of the evangelical fervor of Christianity, but other religions have comparatively weak evangelical components. For example, while Judaism passes matrilineally, and thus places some emphasis on the religious education of the young, it has virtually no evangelical component.

Yet it will be obvious to even the most cursory reader of their books that evangelism is a central concern of the New Atheist critique. The taxonomies they offer largely revolve around that component. Thus Harris argues that "every religion preaches the truth of propositions for which it has no evidence. In fact, every religion preaches the truth of propositions for which no evidence is even *conceivable*."<sup>32</sup> It hardly seems to push the argument too far to say that, for Harris, religion is nothing but a system of beliefs predicated on insufficient evidence and accepted and elaborated irrationally.

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<sup>30</sup> GING, 17

<sup>31</sup> GING, 217

<sup>32</sup> TEOF, 23

That system is held together at the joints by fideism – or belief on the basis of faith alone – even in opposition to reason or counter-evidence.

Despite the tensions that pull between their respective accounts of belief, the Horsemen seem to have all fallen victim to the same pivotal confusion. They have failed to sufficiently distinguish between belief, on the one hand, and creed, on the other. In fact, despite the sheer amount of space each book devotes to the subject of belief, the authors have typically written about creed. Where their accounts encounter to greatest difficulties tend to be the points where they have addressed creed as though it were naively assimilable to belief.



It may be that the focus on creed that we find in the New Atheist accounts of religion results from an overfamiliarity with the Abrahamic traditions. Rabbinic Judaism, which arose in the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE out of the destruction of the primary ritual spaces that Judaism had theretofore centered upon, shifted focus to the exegesis of the Torah. Early Catholicism consolidated creed as a means of unifying Christianity in the face of pagan opposition, and the medieval and Renaissance Inquisitions made credal uniformity a matter of public concern. Islam made recitation of the *shahadah* one of its Five Pillars and memorization of the Quran a mark of piety. Sects of Christian Protestantism promoted the Bible in order to counter and replace the institutional authority of Catholicism, resulting in literalist interpretations and the doctrines of Fundamentalism. In each of these cases, creed has been built into ritual forms, but the argument could be made that it is not the belief, but rather the ritual form (e.g. the recitation, the avowal, the exegesis) that makes each religious. Attend too closely to those models and it may seem that belief plays a uniform role in religion, but even in the cases of Judaism and Christianity, creed formed in a historical context and against a background of ritual. The fact that we today face Judaic, Christian and Islamic traditions with overwhelmingly strong credal forms seems to be less the result of the intrinsic nature of religion than of historical contingency.

In his discussion of “belief in belief”, as well as his acknowledgment of each person’s outsider status with regards to the beliefs of others, Dennett comes closest to recognizing the ritual use of creed. Indeed religion has long recognized the tensions that arise from that outsider status. Here the Catholic example proves illuminating, not only because, of all the religious traditions most familiar to Western societies, it provides the clearest illustration of the principle, but also because the sheer immensity of the Roman Catholic Church’s role in European history explains why we are so

inclined to regard fidelity to creed (not to mention fideism) as part and parcel of all religious belief. Creed has long been a central concern for Catholicism; nothing proves that point quite so simply as the institutions of the Inquisition and excommunication. But our familiarity with those institutions may have misled us into making the unwarranted assumption that what is true of the Catholic tradition is universally characteristic of all religion.

It seems likely, in fact, that the Catholic emphasis on creed and profession of faith originated with the recognition, on the part of members of the early church, that we are, as Dennett puts it, outsiders with respect to the beliefs of others. Vocal adherence to a mutual creed serves as a corrective to the impossibility of assuring uniformity of belief. The crucial question then becomes, what made ensuring uniformity so urgent? Dennett offers his own answer in predictably memetic terms, but in doing so, does nothing to explain the variation we find from tradition to tradition. Put in more concrete terms, why should Catholicism develop an Inquisition, or Judaism a *cherem*, when other religious traditions, such as Shinto or Jainism, have little to compare? It is worth noting that the first several generations of Christianity seem to have been organized much more loosely; to have been much more tolerant of innovations; to have lacked, in fact, the sort of well-defined creedal formulations that would have made it possible to declare any other belief heretical. What changed?

A compelling answer might be: the legal status of Christianity. During its earliest years, the Empire regarded Christianity as a sect of Judaism, and thus subject to the same exceptions granted to the Jews from observance of the State cult. In the latter half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE, violent revolts in Judea drew the previously ambivalent relationship of the Jews and Romans into question, culminating in the Siege of Jerusalem and the Destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, a major turning point in the history of the Jewish religion. It is possible to discern at about the same time a more explicit effort on the part of Christians to distinguish themselves from the Jews.<sup>33</sup> Given the changing political fortunes of the Jewish citizens of Judea, it may have been immediately prudent to distance Christianity from Judaism, but once the Romans had subdued the last major Jewish revolt (that of Simon bar Kokhba in the first half of the second century) it was free to turn its attention to what it now recognized as a new and legally prohibited religion. It was around this time that the Roman persecution of Christianity began in earnest.

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<sup>33</sup> Elaine Pagels has written convincingly on the evidence in the Gospel accounts themselves; cf. esp. *The Origin of Satan* (Vintage:1995).

Put briefly, the historical circumstances of the early development of Christianity fostered a siege mentality among its adherents, and it was in that atmosphere that the demand for a measure of uniformity (or, more to the point, solidarity) took hold. Such siege mentalities appear to be a common context in which we find the insistence on orthodoxy that Dennett points to when he talks of belief in belief. We find another prominent example in the *cherem* declared against Baruch Spinoza in 1656. This was only 17 years after the opening of the first synagogue in Amsterdam, and only a little over 50 years after the first licensed gathering of Jews in the city. The Jewish community of the time was comprised mostly of exiled Polish Ashkenazim, Spanish Marranos and Sephardic Jews. They were tolerated in Amsterdam, but their status remained tenuous and uncertain. Most had known first hand, or were only a generation removed from, religious persecution. So while Spinoza's radical theological and ethical arguments no doubt offended the religious sensibilities of many in the Jewish community, the decision to issue a writ of *cherem* against him was also, in no small part, influenced by the desire to formally distance the Jewish community from a radical who was certain to draw the negative attention of their Dutch hosts.<sup>34</sup>

In light of the tactical value of an insistence on orthodoxy, it becomes reasonable to doubt Dennett's insistence that belief in belief evolved primarily for its usefulness in defending religion from skepticism. In favor of the siege explanation it is at least possible to marshal in historical evidence, however circumstantial. Dennett's evidence for his account proves much more tenuous. It requires, first of all, acceptance of his memetic explanation for the origin of religious ideas; then, of his case for the stewardship, or "memetic engineering," by which he distinguishes organized religion from its folk ancestry. Even having granted those premises, one is left with mostly *post hoc ergo propter hoc* rationalizations. For example: as one of the stronger countermeasures to the skepticism that threatens religious orthodoxy, Dennett introduces the "*diabolical lie*" – the conceit that anyone who "raises questions or objections about our religion that you cannot answer [...] is almost certainly Satan" and is therefore to be avoided.<sup>35</sup> "If I were designing a phony religion," he declares, "I'd surely include a version of this little gem."

That quip, seemingly little more than an aside, is a particularly flagrant species of the sort of argument often brokered in to justify the conspiracy

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<sup>34</sup> Given his advocacy of political denunciation – see "The Irreligious Right" – it is ironic that Dennett would fault the Amsterdam Jews for using the *cherem* to denounce Spinoza: *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, 184–85, quoted in *BtS*, 244.

<sup>35</sup> *BtS*, 207

theory explanation of religion, but it has also held a place in more academic theories as well. In explaining the development of the modern study of religion, the anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard describes that sort of argument as the “introspectionist psychologist’s” fallacy. It is informally known as “if I were a horse” thinking. Evans-Pritchard illustrated it (with respect to Herbert Spencer’s theory of the origins of religion) by writing that, “If Spencer were living in primitive conditions, those would, he assumed, have been the steps by which he would have reached the beliefs which primitives hold.” Since the publication of Evans-Pritchard’s survey and critique of the mainlines of anthropological and sociological theories of religion, the scientific establishment has viewed “if I were a horse” thinking askance. He explains the problem by saying that such theories have “the quality of a just-so story like ‘how the leopard got his spots’.”<sup>36</sup> Theory stands in for evidence, and the edifice of the argument is held together by little more than the façade of *a priori* reasonableness. On the whole, New Atheist accounts of the origin of religion have followed a similar pattern, wherein “a logical construction of the scholar’s mind is posited on primitive man, and put forward as the explanation of his beliefs.”

The diabolical lie is, by Dennett’s own admission, “almost literally, a trick with mirrors, and, like many good magic tricks, it’s so simple that it’s hard to believe it could ever work.” Nevertheless Dennett somehow manages to suspend disbelief, perhaps without warrant. From a distance, versions of the diabolical lie may well seem simple, but closer examination reveals that it is often made possible only by systematic effort. At the very least, it seems to require, again, the maintenance of a siege mentality. “Communist cells,” Dennett explains, “can be warned that any criticism they encounter is almost sure to be the work of FBI infiltrators in disguise, and radical feminist discussion groups can squelch any unanswerable criticism by declaring it to be phallogocentric propaganda being unwittingly spread by a brainwashed dupe of the evil patriarchy, and so forth.”<sup>37</sup> Dennett seems a bit out of touch here. Those examples might well have seemed decisive in the 1960s and 70s, when the Communist and radical feminist versions of the diabolical lie were buttressed by the Cold War and heavy conservative reaction to the Civil Rights movement and sexual revolution, but the context of socialist and feminist thought has shifted since then. Without the (somewhat warranted) siege mentality that accompanied

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<sup>36</sup> *Theories of Primitive Religion*, E. E. Evans-Pritchard (Oxford:1965), 24-25; though Evan-Pritchard does not attribute it to him, the “if I were a horse” formulation may well have originated with the social anthropologist Alfred Radcliffe-Brown.

<sup>37</sup> *BtS*, 206-207



those historical contexts, it seems highly unlikely that very many contemporary left wing thinkers or feminists would find them compelling now.

But there remains a more pressing problem with Dennett's assessment, namely that, by his own principle, we have no reason to suppose that it really works against skepticism. The Communist version of the diabolical lie seems to have been most effective within the Soviet Union and Maoist China. If the citizens of those nations found it convincing, that may have been in large part because Soviet and Maoist governments maintained an extensive and costly apparatus for making it effective. The cost involved makes the diabolical lie more feasible as a concerted political strategy rather than as the sort of "free-floating rationale" Dennett has in mind. In terms of religion, that means the diabolical lie is more likely to crop up alongside an institution that has the resources and centralization necessary to field an Inquisition, than it is to gain any traction among less rigid traditions.<sup>38</sup> More to the present point, those systems ultimately provide an incentive for professing belief in the diabolical lie, even above the incentive they provide for actually believing it. To say that a skeptic is an FBI infiltrator in disguise is to send the coded message that the skeptic, and anyone who fails to sufficiently distance themselves from her, are candidates for denunciation to the authorities. Such examples give us no reason to suppose that anyone ever actually believed the diabolical lie strategy, only that they had good reason to fear the consequences of not professing belief. If anything, the need for intensive and extensive thought reform programs, propaganda *apparatchiki*, and rigidly closed borders ought to indicate that the demands of that sort of stewardship are steeper than Dennett acknowledges.

Being Horsemen, it is perhaps only too apropos that versions of "if I were a horse" thinking should crop up with some frequency in their books, often in little asides like the one Dennett makes with regard to the diabolical lie. More problematic is the degree to which the same argument could be made against their more straight-faced proposals as to the origins of religion. Dennett himself argues that "folk religion" (which is, I take it, roughly analogous to the "primitive religion" of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century anthropologists) arises as the rationalization of cognitive misfirings. Believing that they have detected agency where there is in fact none, our proto-religious ancestors presumably developed an elaborate skein of concepts to explain those "false positives" – concepts like soul, spirit, god,

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<sup>38</sup> It is again worth considering the irony in Dennett's insistence on an obligation to denounce among religious groups, as discussed in "The Irreligious Right." Nothing would seem better contrived to make a form of the diabolical lie strategy more pervasive than it presently is.

and demon. This is plainly a form of introspectionist psychology – Dennett asking himself how he would have arrived at religious concepts had he been born a member of preliterate folk society. But his explanation presumes fundamental cognitive differences; it is as though he actually were talking about a different species. If I may editorialize for a moment, it almost seems that a kind of revulsion keeps critics of religion from supposing that religion could have originated with people like themselves. That “uncanny valley” proves particularly striking in *God Is Not Great*, where Hitchens argues that religion is transparently false, even to a child, but that it is nevertheless the product of ancient peoples who were merely doing the best they could to explain a mysterious world.<sup>39</sup>

For Harris, liberal attitudes towards religion are actually the result of a failure to sufficiently think from an “if I were a horse” perspective. How else are we to understand his repeated refrain that those who differ with him over what is to be done about religion simply do not understand what it is like to “really believe” in the tenets of a given religious faith? Here the confusion of belief with creed is more fundamental, perhaps even willful. It has required his close attention in order to maintain the tactical value that comes with it. The causal line that he draws between belief and the most abhorrent behavior of professed religious believers relies heavily on his refusal to clarify the difference between belief and creed. It allows him to treat creed as though it were *a priori* clear that it motivated the excesses of religious extremists. The attention that Harris devotes to strengthening the distinction between fundamentalists and religious moderates can, perhaps, be explained as one strategy for maintaining that ambiguity. “The truth, astonishingly enough, is this,” he tells us:

in the year 2006, a person can have sufficient intellectual and material resources to build a nuclear bomb and still believe that he will get seventy-two virgins in Paradise. Western secularists, liberals, and moderates have been very slow to understand. The cause of their confusion is simple: they don’t know what it is like to *really* believe in God.<sup>40</sup>

Yet it is worth noting that the focal point of his example is not theism itself, but rather orthodoxy. It is not belief in God that, on his account, motivated the suicide terrorism of the 9/11 hijackers, but rather their affirmation of a particular (and much disputed) Islamic *hadith*. Implicitly,

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<sup>39</sup> These themes are placed in their larger historical context in “The Heirs of *La Coterie Holbachique*.”

<sup>40</sup> *LtaCN*, 83

though, Harris has conflated theism with the wholesale acceptance of orthodoxy, and a motif that recurs throughout both of his earlier books is that a failure to affirm the entirety of a given religious creed amounts to a failure to sufficiently believe any part of that creed, even the most basic theological premise.<sup>41</sup> A similar strain informs Dennett's treatment of "Preachers Who Are Not Believers."



It should be clear from the foregoing that significant problems arise from defining religion according to belief, and hardly any fewer problems arise when we substitute creed for belief. I do not here intend to provide anything quite so precise as a definition of religion. Rather, for the purpose of this essay it should suffice to provide a criteria for identifying religions in the wild, so to speak, as long as that criteria improves upon the New Atheist taxonomies by resolving the bulk of their contradictions and limitations. That can be achieved, it seems, by shifting our focus away from belief and profession, and onto practice. We may identify certain behaviors that are characteristically religious, and say that a person who practices them regularly is religious – just as a person who practices politics would qualify as political, without any consideration of what they may believe or profess. What are the characteristically religious behaviors? We may need to name nothing more than a certain class of rituals.

By ritual I mean, first of all, behavior that is formulaic; it can be, at least in principle, repeated in order to reliably achieve certain effects. Not all rituals are necessarily religious; the pre-game ritual of the coin toss to decide which team will play offense first may be merely a practical solution to an unavoidable but not insoluble problem inherent to team sports. The sort of rituals needed in this context are those that aim at the transfiguration of the participant – as when the Catholic is absolved of their sin by participation in the Sacraments, the Pagan neophyte initiated in to the mysteries of their cult, or the adherent of Shinto ritually purified. Harris briefly acknowledges that characteristic of religion, writing that, "At the core of every religion lies an undeniable claim about the human condition: it is possible to have one's experience of the world radically transformed."<sup>42</sup> But he uses that acknowledgment only to segue between portions of a credal treatment of the topic. Personal transformation plays no part in his

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<sup>41</sup> For more on that theme, see "The Diagnostics of Belief" and "A Drawing of Lines."

<sup>42</sup> *TEoF*, 204

account of religion, and even here the sentence is contrived so as to emphasize the epistemic content (the “undeniable claim”) over any ritual content. He may thereby have inverted the priority of belief and ritual. Belief in the doctrine of any give religious tradition may contribute to (or result from) the ritual, but ends up being, in either case, secondary to the practice.

To make clear a point that may seem counterintuitive, a participant need not believe in order to truly practice religion. By the same token, a person may believe in any number of credal formulations associated with religion, and yet fail to qualify as religious for lack of any ritual component. Thus, Dawkins can profess belief in the *Zeitgeist* that guides moral Progress,<sup>43</sup> without thereby exposing himself as a “religious believer” – a term that invites reevaluation in light of our new criteria for identifying religion. If religion is more readily and reliably identified by ritual practice than by belief, then it stands to reason that religious believers may prove only a subset of the religious population as a whole, and that some believers (including some theists) may not be religious at all.

A defining characteristic of the transfigurations that are the aim of religious practice may be that they are, from the perspective of the outsider, merely symbolic. That does not mean that the participant herself will view them as primarily symbolic, though nor does it preclude the possibility that she will prefer the symbolic interpretation to a more literal one. The Roman Catholic controversy over the transubstantiation of the Host serves as a suitably concrete illustration of the principle, with the doctrinaire Catholic claiming that the wine and cracker literally become the blood and body of Christ, though the scientifically-minded secularist finds no evidence of their change. In the end, it may not even matter whether or not the Catholic involved in the Eucharist believes in the transubstantiation of the Host; what matters to her will be the ritual’s role in her own transfiguration. All that changes by subtracting transubstantiation from the ritual may be the participants credal allegiance, from orthodox Roman Catholicism to some brand of Protestantism.

We might say, then, that religious rituals are subjective, rather than objective. Acknowledgment that another person’s experience of some such ritual matches our own requires an element of trust – or if you prefer, faith. Trust, rather than the “belief without evidence” canard preferred by New Atheist accounts, seems to form the core of most conceptions of faith, both secular and religious. Thus contracts must avoid “bad faith,” plaintiffs for justice rely on their faith in the institution to which they have petitioned

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<sup>43</sup> See the “Landscapes and Zeitgeists” for more on those apparent lapses of rationalism.

(else they seek justice some other way), and marriage ceremonies elicit promises of fidelity. Once we have abandoned the purported centrality of belief, the active extension of trust becomes the primary religious role played by faith.

Having suggested the barest outline of a criteria for identifying religion, let us see how that criteria holds up in practice. We may start with the broadest standards of applicability. Are there any phenomenon that we would all agree are religion, but that would not be identified as such by our criteria? I can think of none. All seem to have some form of ritual that may be described from an outside perspective as symbolic and which aims at some form of transfiguration. None of those mutually agreed upon examples are left out of account as they are by the multiple criteria suggested by the Horsemen's accounts.

Moreover the fact that the immediate results of religious ritual will generally be, from an outside perspective, regarded as merely symbolic allows us to draw some distinctions that those other criteria are poor at excluding. That is to say, the subjectivity of religion distinguishes it, on the one hand, from magic, which is supposed to afford the direct manipulation of empirical phenomenon; and also distinguishes it, on the other hand, from politics, which aims at practical alterations in the structure of society. The effects of both, then, should be open to consensus, even among those who deny the efficacy of the practices involved. Either a magician can levitate, or he cannot. In principle, it should matter little whether or not you believe it can be done.

That the most characteristically religious behavior is generally subjective need not exclude the view that devout religious observance can have a significant impact, whether for good or ill, on the world of common experience. It does, however, strongly imply that the empirical effect happen at several removes from the ritual itself. The religious adherent becomes a force for good in the world, if at all, by first transforming herself; e.g. by finding her Buddha-nature; by submitting to Allah or the Law; or by striving to become more Christ-like. Politics typically inverts that relationship, as when Communism seeks to transform the nature of individuals by a prolonged process of altering the tangible conditions in which they live. If there remains any question as to whether or not totalitarian regimes are intrinsically political or religion, one need only look to the vast reordering of their respective societies, economies and legal systems to see that they are, first and foremost, political.

By the same token, if we take the simplistic view that the function of prayer is to goad a supernatural agent into producing certain effects in the world, then prayer would not count as a characteristically religious ritual. Generally speaking, that is the view tested by the studies all Four Horsemen

cite,<sup>44</sup> and it is hardly surprising that the results should incline against the suggestion that God functions as a supernatural vending machine. Supposing that prayer is a form of ritual restores its religious value. Those on the inside are thus free to see it as a transformative act, while those on the outside may picture it as a largely symbolic act.

Here the potential for confusion arises. When the religious participant treats prayer as mechanical operation (pull the lever, win a prize) they turn it into a kind of magical, rather than strictly religious, act. But regarding prayer as an appeal that *might* be heeded does not necessarily make a magic show of it. When a request made in prayer is not met according to the letter, it is common to hear a devout petitioner say, "God works in mysterious ways," or, "It wasn't God's will." Dennett, convinced that all such behavior must be looked at in terms of belief, has argued that these are tactical evasions that maintain the efficacy of prayer even in the face of its apparent failure. In doing so, he has overlooked the potential ritual value of such explanations. Prayer, seen as a ritual, may be said to transform the petitioner's relationship to the world by way of the dynamic that arises between she and her god. That dynamic, from Dennett's perspective as an outsider, may be little more than symbolic, and especially so since, from the same perspective, the agent on the other side of the relationship is likewise only symbolic. But that does nothing to change the petitioner's experience of transformation.



By these examples I have hoped to suggest some of the ways in which it may be rational to regard practice as a better criteria for identifying religious phenomenon than the taxonomies offered by the Four Horsemen. It remains to examine some of the consequences for their accounts should that criteria prove acceptable. For them, no doubt, these consequences will make my suggestion entirely unwelcome, in proportion with their commitment to a given polemic.

First of all, shifting from belief to practice as the central identifying feature requires a reassessment of the religious classifications they have offered. Insofar as Buddhism consists of a set of rituals that may be used to "have one's experience of the world radically transformed,"<sup>45</sup> it is at hazard of being classed a religion. Harris comes close to recognizing as much when he identifies such transformation as residing, "at the core of every religion," and salvages his own ritual form only by insisting on the fideist taxonomy

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<sup>44</sup> Cf. esp. *TGD*, 85-90 and *BtS*, 274-275.

<sup>45</sup> *TEoF*, 204

of religion. He is, therefore, almost certainly the least likely among the Four Horsemen to acknowledge the merits of the criteria on offer here, not from any incapacity on his part, but because doing so might put him on the wrong side of the rhetorical divide. It may be that, since the publication of *The End of Faith*, Harris has encountered work that further challenges the emphasis he places on belief. *The Moral Landscape* finds him begrudgingly acknowledging ritual, then quickly reiterating the position that “belief precedes ritual and that a practice like prayer is usually thought to be a genuine act of communication with a God (or gods).”<sup>46</sup> In support of that position he offers precisely no evidence. To that end, we might ask how Harris has determined that “the doctrine of Transubstantiation remains the most plausible origin” of the ritual of Catholic Mass<sup>47</sup> – particularly when so much of the evidence of the history of Catholicism suggests that the basic ritual elements of Mass had taken shape long before the articulation of that doctrine?<sup>48</sup>

What, then, are we to make of the program he suggests in the chapter “Experiments in Consciousness” from his first book?<sup>49</sup> Meditation he presents as “any means whereby our sense of ‘self’ – of subject/object dualism in perception and cognition – can be made to vanish, while consciousness remains vividly aware of the continuum of experience.” Presumably, he does not really mean “any means,” else the neurologist Oliver Sacks could no doubt suggest some surgical “meditation” that would permanently obliterate that sense of self for him. No, Harris seems to be talking specifically about rituals resulting in subjective effects and which result in a transfiguration that the skeptic might call merely symbolic. He offers several rationalizations that allow him to dismiss, at least to his own satisfaction, any suggestion that what he is doing might be religious. The contradictions entailed by those evasions are argument enough for the need of a better criteria for identifying religion. “Mysticism is a rational enterprise,” he argues. “Religion is not.” What “rational” could mean in that context is anyone’s guess.

Similarly, the lines Dawkins draws throughout *The God Delusion* come into question under the new criteria. His attempts to wring from Robert

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<sup>46</sup> *TML*, 148

<sup>47</sup> *TML*, 149

<sup>48</sup> Transubstantiation is, at most, suggested by the language in gospel accounts of the Last Supper, but even if we injudiciously date that as the origin of the doctrine, the Last Supper was likely patterned after the Jewish tradition of Passover Seder – a clear instance of ritual preceding creed.

<sup>49</sup> *TEoF*, 204-221

Winston some admission that his Judaism was essentially Einsteinian,<sup>50</sup> for instance, takes on a new character. Even if Winston were to admit that he “has no theistic beliefs, but shares the poetic naturalism that the cosmos provokes in other scientists,” he would not thereby leave the ranks of the religious. It is, rather, his participation in the rituals of Judaism that mark him as religious. For the most part the Deists could likely be left on Dawkins side of the ledger, excepting those who participated in the Cult of Reason that arose during the French Revolution; the Pantheists whom Dawkins considers little more than “sexed-up” atheists, however, would have to be checked for rituals, and Spinoza almost certainly returns to the religious camp. Indeed, the supposed opposition between atheism and religion falls apart, since there can be no direct opposition between a lack of belief and a behavior with no intrinsic epistemic content. Dennett’s presumed “non-believing clergy” would continue to qualify as religious, whether or not they believe in the deity associated with their respective creeds.

The insistence on an evolutionary explanation that identifies religion as a misfiring of some other cognitive faculty depends in large part on the supposition that religion is primarily a form of belief. Thus, the notion that it is better identified by ritual in pursuit of the experience of transfiguration calls into question the entirety of Dennett’s account of the rise of religion. Such accounts need not be declared wrong, but it will be acknowledged that they suffer from a misplaced emphasis on the origins and development of structures of belief. Likewise, the new criteria obviates the more simplistic and largely outdated suggestion, offered by both Harris and Hitchens, that religion arose as a misguided attempt to explain the natural world. From the neutral, outside perspective, the phenomenon of religion may still be regarded as the by-product of other cognitive states, but the emphasis on practice opens the possibility that religious behavior takes advantage of the cognitive features that make it possible, rather than suffers them as design flaws. On this account, the religious ecstasy of the Medlevi dervish is not a consequence of the sort of brain humans have, but rather a creative and deliberate utilization of the idiosyncrasies of that apparatus. *Contra* Dennett’s analogy, religion is not a parasite that makes the dervish whirl; rather, the dervish’s consciousness allows him to use religion in order to provoke certain responses from a brain that may in turn alter that consciousness. If anything, human consciousness is the fluke.

We might, no doubt, go on in that vein for some time, elaborating further consequences. Indeed, it would be difficult to overstate the importance of how the Four Horsemen circumscribe religion as a phenomenon for the

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<sup>50</sup> TGD, 35; see “A Drawing of Lines” for context.



critique that each renders. If we are to acknowledge a logical unity in their arguments, it becomes all but imperative that we make the effort to trace those arguments back to a grounded view of the subject in question. If it turns out, as this essay suggests, that they have built their arguments on a unsteady foundation, one that misidentifies the subject from the very beginning, then how can we have any confidence in the conclusions to which they argue? Ultimately, recognizing the limitations of their accounts requires a reassessment of the judgments they have passed against religion.



## LANDSCAPES AND ZEITGEISTS

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THE FOUR HORSEMEN ARE MOST UNITED, and most emphatic, when they oppose religion on grounds that it is inherently immoral. It is not merely that we do not need religion to be truly moral, but that religion is antithetical to the development genuine morality. In order to make that argument, the Horsemen must insist that we can, at least in principle, agree on what counts as moral. And so long as they stick to issues on which a clear social consensus already prevails, that insistence is likely to go unchallenged. For example: after dredging up a handful of Bible verses that acknowledge and regulate the practice of slavery, Harris concludes that, “while the abolitionists of the nineteenth century were morally right, they were on the losing side of a theological argument.”<sup>1</sup> As far as he is concerned, “Nothing in Christian theology remedies the appalling deficiencies of the Bible on what is perhaps the greatest – and the *easiest* – moral question our society has ever had to face.”<sup>2</sup>

That issue may well seem an easy one, provided you stand at the proper end of history. Yet, for the greater part of the last 4,000 years, the social reality of slavery was more often given than not. Harris writes as though Christian adherence to the moral authority of the Bible were the primary obstacle to abolition, in part by insisting on the exclusive legitimacy of its fundamentalist variants. If it were true that religion functioned by insisting on the complete and unquestioning fidelity to an unassailable textual authority, that argument might carry weight. But there is little reason to suppose that the ossification of religious tradition has ever been so routine as he implies. Christian fundamentalism arose in the 20<sup>th</sup> century United States, and even the unquestionable centrality of scripture was a doctrinal

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<sup>1</sup> *LtaCN*, 17

<sup>2</sup> *LtaCN*, 17-18

innovation when the Protestants of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformations suggested it as a means of displacing the institutional authority of the Roman Catholic Church.

Despite Dawkins' insistence that "we (and that includes most religious people) as a matter of fact *don't* get our morals from scripture," the example of slavery is illuminating in part because scripture seems nevertheless to have played an important role in paving the way for the longest sustained absence of institutional slavery in European history. To understanding how that could be so, it is only necessary to take seriously Harris' contention that the moral issue was, for Christians, a theological question. The scriptural justifications for slavery that he presents are, strictly speaking, not theological at all. It would be a stretch to call the deuterio-Pauline verse commanding slaves to "be obedient to those who are your earthly masters"<sup>3</sup> theological in any literal sense of the term. However, there is compelling evidence to suggest that early Christians built an ideological opposition to slavery on the strength of a religiously constructed vision of humanity's relationship to the God of Judeo-Christian tradition, and did so in the teeth of the very model of a slave civilization.<sup>4</sup> That such opposition put them at odds with the culture in which they lived only serves to emphasize the role their religious commitments played in putting them on what we, on this side of abolition, consider to be the right side of the moral issue. For the better part of 1,500 years, and apparently on the slender premise that God invests each individual with an immortal soul, most Christians eschewed the institution on which Rome had built the most expansive and powerful Empire then known to Europe.

While that example alone would hardly be sufficient to build an inarguable case against the simplifications of the polemical atheists, it should be enough to suggest the outlines of how religion actually influences moral reasoning. The paradigm that Harris presents is, at best, a distorting simplification, and at worst, a straw man. It serves the rhetorical purpose of presenting the relationship between morality and religion in the worst possible light, but cannot stand up to historical investigation. Even modern fundamentalists, whom Harris favorably contrasts to religious moderates, derive their moral commitments by a similar process. The typical fundamentalist position *vis à vis* abortion, for example, cannot be deduced from an unadorned, literal reading of the Bible. It is built, rather, on an extrapolation from theological principle.

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<sup>3</sup> Ephesians 6:5, quoted in *LtaCN*, 16; "deuterio-Pauline" because most modern scholars dispute the authorship of Ephesians.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. eg. *Adam, Eve and the Serpent: Sex and Politics in Early Christianity*, Elaine Pagels (Vintage:1989)

Given their polemical interest in leveraging a moral consensus against the claims of religious moral authority, it comes as no surprise that the Horsemen are united in opposing the suggestion that morality might be relative. Moral realism – the position that there are objectively right and wrong answers about morality – allows them to reject any suggestion that religious morality might be valid within its own context. In part, they do so by insisting on a very narrow sense of the term moral relativism. “No one,” as Harris explains it, “is ever really *right* about what he believes; he can only point to a community of peers who believe likewise. Suicide bombing isn’t really *wrong*, in any absolute sense; it just seems so from the parochial perspective of Western culture.”<sup>5</sup> Aptly enough, this caricature comes under the heading, “The Demon of Relativism,” as though to admit that Harris’ design is to demonize the very notion that perspectives are relative. To put it into context, he writes, “Moral relativism is clearly an attempt to pay intellectual reparations for the crimes of western colonialism, ethnocentrism, and racism.”<sup>6</sup> In fact, we may observe the first stirrings of modern moral relativism long before colonialism and the articulation of the racial and ethnocentric theories that characterize modern history, particularly in popular reactions to John Mandeville’s *Travels*. It already had wide currency by the time of the Enlightenment to which the New Atheists are so committed.<sup>7</sup>

Harris draws a distinction useful for understanding types of relativism, though the Horsemen themselves never put it to that use. The distinction is between the epistemic and ontological senses of the terms “objective” and “subjective.”<sup>8</sup> A person who espouses moral relativism may mean either that morals themselves are relative (ontological relativism), or that our knowledge about morality is relative to our circumstances (epistemic relativism). The Horsemen unanimously object to moral relativism of the ontological type; that is, to the idea that there are no objectively right and wrong answers to moral questions. But this they too often conflate with moral relativism of the epistemic sort, which may amount to nothing more than the claim that we have yet to find any foolproof way of determining the answers to those questions. A person can espouse the epistemic version without thereby committing themselves to the ontological. In fact, *pace*

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<sup>5</sup> *TEoF*, 178

<sup>6</sup> *TML*, 45

<sup>7</sup> For example, see Mandeville’s effects on Mennochio in *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth Century Miller*, Carlos Ginzburg (Johns Hopkins:1980); for his effect on moral and epistemic thought of the day, cf. esp. Montaigne’s *Essays* (1580).

<sup>8</sup> *TML*, 29

Harris, that seems to be something like the default position for contemporary philosophers and social scientists.<sup>9</sup>

Distinctions of that sort prove to be of great consequence when it comes to understanding the subject of morality. In any discussion of moral and ethical theory, then, it behooves us to begin by clarifying our terms and attending to some of the more persistent issues that complicate the field. There is, first of all, the matter of what we mean by “morality” and by “ethics.” As a starting point, we may take it as granted that both refer to criteria for behavior; that is, to the question of what we *ought* to do. By definition, morality and ethics do more than describe: to qualify as moral or ethical, they must prescribe. They are often used in popular discussion as though they were approximately synonymous, but insofar as it bears on the arguments presented by the Four Horsemen, there are strong practical arguments for distinguishing between the two. While it would involve us in something like a genetic fallacy to insist on defining them according to lexicographical origins, we may at least suggest the conceptual point of divergence between them by pointing out that the word “moral” is derived from the Latin *mors*, indicating custom; “ethics,” from the Greek *ethos*, character. As such, we tend to think of morality as the standards of conduct that we inherit from the culture into which we are born, while the individualistic, philosophical discipline of constructing such standards logically is generally termed ethics. Both have, at times, been associated with the notions of good and evil, right and wrong, or some other such dichotomy: this will prove to be of great consequence further on.

I have found little evidence in their work to suggest that the Four Horsemen make use of any conscientious distinction between morality and ethics along those lines, but I think the distinction is worth noting, if for no other reason than that morality’s association with tradition, and with traditional dichotomies like good and evil, make it a natural fit for religion, while the least we can say of the critique rendered by polemical atheism is that it aspires to the status of ethical theory. That the authors tolerate some measure of ambiguity in their use of the two terms is not without consequence, and it sometimes proves unclear whether they mean to invoke one set of associations or another. To that confusion it will be necessary to add a third term: *casuistry*. That I have noticed, only Harris and Hitchens

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. e.g. “The PhilPapers Survey,” November 2009, a survey of more than 3,000 philosophy professionals, faculty members, PhDs and graduate students. Over 56% of the respondents either accepted or leaned toward “moral realism,” while only about 28% accepted or leaned toward moral “anti-realism.” The surveys may be accessed at <http://philpapers.org/surveys/>.

even mention casuistry, and both in the pejorative sense of a subtle or specious evasion of logical consequence.<sup>10</sup> There is, however, a neutral and more technical sense of the term that is more to our purpose. In the context of ethical philosophy, casuistry refers to the application of moral or ethical reasoning to particular cases, the word being derived from the Latin *casus*, meaning “case.”

An illustration: Benjamin Constant, the early 19<sup>th</sup> century author of the psychological novel *Adolphe*, challenged Immanuel Kant’s “Categorical Imperative” by asking whether it would be ethical to lie to a murderer about the location of his intended victim. The categorical imperative seemed to imply that it would be unethical to do so, but many people were inclined to suppose that the greater good rested with protecting the intended victim from harm. Kant responded to Constant with the essay *On a Supposed Right to Tell Lies from Benevolent Motives*, which provocatively concluded that it would, indeed, be unethical to lie, even if doing so would be a convenient way to avert violence. We have, then, three exemplary works, one of morality, one of ethics, and one of casuistry. The ethical theory that informs Kant’s response was his Categorical Imperative, described in an earlier book, the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*. Because it applies the ethical premise of a categorical imperative to the case suggested by Constant, *On a Supposed Right* serves as an instance of casuistry. And Constant’s challenge invokes traditional morality, by playing on the tension that can arise between inherited or intuitive judgments and ethical theory, the consequences of which may not be entirely clear from the outset.

Much of what we shall be concerned with in what follows hinges on the consequences entailed by seemingly straightforward attempts to ground ethical theory in rational bedrock. The important point is that, in principle if not always in practice, casuistry necessarily stands on a prior foundation of moral or ethical theory, and the soundness of any particular instance of casuistry depends on the soundness of the underlying theory. That relationship proves critical since what the Horsemen present as moral and ethical reasoning sometimes proves upon closer examination to be casuistry, leaving frustratingly open the question of whether it is based on a prior foundation of sound theory.

The difference between the ethical principle of Kant and the moral objection of Constant may also be taken as an example of the modern distinction between consequentialism and deontology. Consequentialism

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<sup>10</sup> Harris uses it to dismiss Islamic pacifism as an evasion of credal injunctions to violence: *TEoF*, 111 & 113; Hitchens uses it to contrast the New Testament characterization of the Pharisees to the integrity of Socrates: *GING*, 120 & 256, respectively.

may be described as the disposition for judging the morality of a thing or behavior based on the anticipation of its consequences. Constant gestures towards consequentialism when he suggests that the lie told to the murderer would be justified so long as it spared the intended victim from a worse fate. In a broader sense, consequentialism presumes the desirability of a given state of affairs, and judges behaviors by their propensity to bring about that state. By contrast, deontology (derived from the Greek *deon*, “duty,” and *logos*, “word”) focuses on the purported intrinsic value of imperatives or rules. Kant’s suggestion, that the value in a moral rule against lying rests in its universality, represents a classic example of deontological ethics.

Generally, religious moral codes take the form of absolute injunctions, and are, therefore, characteristically deontological. Yet it would be going too far to take theism as a reliable indicator of deontological alignment, as Dawkins seems to do in the case of Mother Teresa of Calcutta. He marvels that she “actually said, in her speech accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, ‘The greatest destroyer of peace is abortion.’ *What?* How can a woman with such cock-eyed judgment be taken seriously on any topic, let alone be thought worthy of a Nobel Prize.”<sup>11</sup> Perhaps because his source for the quotation was Hitchens’ polemical book *The Missionary Position*, rather than the speech itself, Dawkins seems to have assumed that Teresa had deontological reasons for her declaration. One page over, Dawkins admits that, “a consequentialist might have grounds to oppose abortion. ‘Slippery slope’ arguments can be framed by consequentialists (though I wouldn’t in this case). Maybe embryos don’t suffer, but a culture that tolerates the taking of human life risks going too far: where will it all end?” Turning directly to the Nobel speech itself, we find Mother Teresa making just that point. Abortion is “the greatest destroyer of peace,” she specifies, “Because if a mother can kill her own child – what is left for me to kill you and you to kill me – there is nothing between.”<sup>12</sup> The implication is that participating in abortion eases the way to murder by encouraging a more cavalier attitude towards fully developed human life. Even if a person disagrees with her premise, she has clearly framed the topic in consequentialist language.

Further confusion is evident in a section of *The God Delusion* entitled “A Case Study in the Roots of Morality”<sup>13</sup> There, Dawkins presents in miniature a string of “thought experiments” as a means “of introducing the way moral philosophers think.” The examples are drawn from biologist Marc Hauser’s book *Moral Minds: How Nature Designed our Universal*

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<sup>11</sup> TGD, 330

<sup>12</sup> “Nobel Lecture,” December 11, 1979

<sup>13</sup> TGD, 254-258



*Sense of Right and Wrong*, and pose what Dawkins calls “a hypothetical moral dilemma,” on the premise that “the difficulty we experience in answering it tells us something about our sense of right and wrong.” In fact, this has very little to do with moral philosophy. Hauser has taken traditional exercises in casuistry and applied them to the purpose of discerning how his subjects bring moral judgment to bear. For Dawkins, “the interesting thing is that most people come to the same decisions when faced with these dilemmas, and their agreement over the decisions themselves is stronger than their ability to articulate their reasons.” Given our distinction between morality and ethics, that hardly proves surprising: most everyone is capable of reasoning from culturally inherited moral premises, but it requires the more specialized and rare discipline of ethical philosophy to articulate one’s reasons for how those premises are applied. Nevertheless, Dawkins interprets that consistency as evidence of an innate morality, since those results are “what we should expect if we have a moral sense which is built into our brains, like our sexual instinct or our fear of heights or, as Hauser himself prefers to say, like our capacity for language.” It is characteristic of his line of argument that, while Hauser compares moral thought to a faculty (language), Dawkins likens it to an instinct or reflex, as though morality were the sort of physical reaction one had to looking over the ledge of a tall building. All of this is meant to stand in support of Dawkins’ conclusion, “that we do not need God in order to be good – or evil,” but here he has mistaken the character of Hauser’s study, which does not assess the validity of moral claims at all. At best, it tests for consistency between groups where we might expect to find different moral judgements at play. *Moral Minds* examines the way in which people reason from traditional moral principles, i.e. how they practice casuistry. But that tells us nothing (and cannot, even in principle, tell us anything) about whether or not those premises are actually moral, nor whether or not Hauser’s subjects have applied them correctly. For that, we need ethics.

The central ethical issue is epistemic: how can we ever know what we ought to do. Put simply, how do we know that a given thing is “good,” or that a given behavior is “moral?” To illustrate the difficulty behind such questions, consider how a scientist would determine the answer to the following question: how do we know that a given object is made of gold? Archimedes was tasked with answering just that question, and the solution he formulated involved comparing the volume of water the object displaced to the volume of water displaced by an object of the same dimensions known to be pure gold. The point is that scientific study hinges on experiments with empirical objects. In the context of ethical philosophy, epistemology is invoked to address the question of how we establish the

truth of ethical claims that apparently have no empirical content apart from their professed capacity to oblige certain behaviors.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century this problem was cast in stark relief by the Scottish philosopher David Hume in his formulation of what is traditionally known as the *is-ought problem*. Hume expressed it by noting that,

In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remark'd, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary ways of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when all of a sudden I am surpriz'd to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, *is*, and *is not*, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an *ought*, or an *ought not*. This change is imperceptible; but is however, of the last consequence. For as this *ought*, or *ought not*, expresses some new relation or affirmation, 'tis necessary that it shou'd be observ'd and explain'd; and at the same time that a reason should be given; for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it.<sup>14</sup>

Historically, Hume's formula has been taken to burden those making ethical claims with the responsibility for grounding those claims in a context of epistemic theory. It would not go too far to say that the *is-ought* problem charted the course for all subsequent ethical philosophy, and drew into question all that had preceded it.



In the context of their irreligious polemic, Dennett and Hitchens have, perhaps wisely, chosen not to address that burden directly. By contrast, Harris and Dawkins have both attempted to supplement their moral criticisms of religion with the construction of supposedly scientific theories of morality. The results more often resemble theories of behaviorism.

A sophisticated (or, if you prefer, sophistical) attempt to solve that problem has grown out of attempts on the part of evolutionary psychologists to determine the biological origin of our capacity for moral thought. Dawkins expresses the main line when he writes that, "If our moral sense, like our sexual desire, is indeed rooted deep in our Darwinian past, predating religion, we should expect that research on the human mind

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<sup>14</sup> *A Treatise of Human Nature*, (1739) Bk. III, Part I, § I

would reveal some moral universals, crossing geographical and cultural barriers, and also, crucially, religious barriers.”<sup>15</sup> The typical process of deriving morality from “our Darwinian past” begins by implying an exclusive association between morality and altruism. “In general,” writes Dawkins, “as my late colleague W. D. Hamilton showed, animals tend to care for, defend, share resources with, warn of danger, or otherwise show altruism towards close kin because of the statistical likelihood that kin will share copies of the same genes.”<sup>16</sup> To the extent that it suggests volition, that “because” proves misleading. On the evolutionary account the causal relationship is precisely the reverse: animals behave altruistically not in order to increase the fitness of shared genes, but because the genes which dispose them towards altruistic behavior are strategically more stable.<sup>17</sup> Dawkins no doubt recognizes that behaviorist perspective, but putting the relationship in its most logically sound order would weaken his rhetorical point. By gesturing towards causation, Dawkins suggests a direct relationship between moral concern and the genetic imperative.

Two dangers immediately arise. On the one hand, the genetic rationale may be taken to negate morality in the full sense of the term. Given that all morality reduces to altruism, and that all altruism is an effect of genetically-encoded behavioral predispositions, then perhaps our preference for moral behavior is no more prescriptive than our preference for sweet and salty foods. No one says that it is moral to prefer sweet and salty foods; we are biologically disposed to prefer them, and so we do. Likewise, if morality is a disposition, then perhaps there is no more objective reason to prefer moral behavior than there is to prefer sweet over bitter. In this new context, altruism becomes merely descriptive: we feed the hungry not because we ought to, but because we are the kind of animal that does so. This reverses the priority of Hume’s *is-ought* problem, dissolving *ought* into just another state description. To say, as Dawkins and company seem to suggest, that we ought to prefer moral behavior because it works as a sound evolutionary strategy resolves nothing, since we are then thrown back on the question of why we ought to value the results of sound evolutionary strategy. The only answer the evolutionary account of morality can provide is that we *ought to* because we *do*.

Dawkins would, I think, reject that transformation of morality, but does nothing to circumvent it. One reason may be that his interest in ethical theory is largely defensive. Against the suggestion that people cannot

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<sup>15</sup> *TGD*, 254

<sup>16</sup> *TGD*, 247

<sup>17</sup> Precisely here, the association between morality and altruism falls prey to the naturalistic fallacy, which will be explained in greater detail further on.

sustain morality without religion, he has put forward an explanation of morality that is meant to persuade us that humans will naturally develop a consistent moral sensibility. Atheism and irreligion are, therefore, nothing to fear. In doing so, he has failed to recognize how that explanation undercuts what it is that distinguishes moral behavior from any other kind of behavior. To paraphrase Sartre's formulation of Karamazov's thesis: without *ought*, all things are permitted.

The second danger is that Dawkins' account of morality will survive that potential self-negation by enshrining genetic altruism as the basis for ethical thought: that the gene will, in traditional moral terms, be understood as the final arbiter of the good. One of the challenges of ethical philosophy is the way in which the introduction of new premises results in unexpected but entirely logical consequences. If Dawkins and company have failed to chart the potential for unforeseen conclusions in their moral inquiry, that is likely because they had hoped to change out one foundation for another, while nevertheless arriving at substantially the same conclusions as before. Harris exposes that conservatism when he writes that, "there is every reason to expect that kindness, compassion, fairness, and other classically 'good' traits will be vindicated neuroscientifically – which is to say that we will only discover further reasons to believe that they are good for us, in that they generally enhance our lives."<sup>18</sup> In their advocacy of those moral virtues, they are mostly aligned with the religious, but opposed to the role religion plays in advocating moral norms. Notable breaks over specific issues, such as that of abortion, present themselves, but for the most part Dawkins intends for his system to arrive at a set of prescriptions that most religious believers would recognize as moral, in that, like religious proscriptions, they prohibit murder, theft, dishonesty, and so on.

Instead, attempts to ground moral theory in evolutionary accounts of the origins of altruism threaten to prove that our genes are indeed selfish, and they are claiming morality for themselves. History has, in fact, seen attempts to place Darwinian evolution at the heart of ethics. The historian Richard Hofstadter described a few such trends in his indispensable monograph, *Social Darwinism in American Thought*.<sup>19</sup> A gene-centric moral theory need not as a matter of course fit those prior molds, but the almost inevitable logical consequence of any gene-centric theory is that it will sacrifice the individual for the proliferation of traits. It is, in that regard, eugenic, and the only escape from that consequence is to suppose a prior good that trumps biological altruism. That is to say, that the only way to curb the detriment that accrues to the human subjects of a eugenic moral

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<sup>18</sup> TML, 80

<sup>19</sup> Pennsylvania:1944

theory is to deny, after all, that morality refers primarily genetic imperatives. Taken as an ethical axiom, enshrining biological altruism as the factual basis for moral imperatives exposes us to the sort of logic that ends in the conclusion that any person may be sacrificed so long as doing so will be of likely advantage to her genes by way of her relatives. Feeding grandmother, for example, diverts precious resources away from her grandchildren of childbearing age; letting her starve could potentially benefit the genetic line that she unknowingly privileges when she herself behaves morally.

Falling back on evolutionary explanations for altruistic behavior satisfies only so long as the consequences of those explanations coincide with what we expect of morality. It could at most be argued that such accounts provide the basis for a contingent morality, one which points to the evolutionary rationale for altruism as the model for how we ought to behave if we want to ensure the good of humanity. In Dawkins' account the main beneficiary is the gene. Any benefit that accrues to individual people or to society does so incidentally, if at all. But however all else may be measured, humanity remains the best measure of its own morality. Fortunately, the eugenic principle expressed by Dawkins may be easily dismissed on logical grounds, as it fails to meet the standard for prescription and cannot, in the end, solve the *is-ought* problem. All Dawkins has really said is that humans can, on average, be relied upon to behave altruistically; not that we ought to.

If Dawkins has fallen short of demonstrating that we are, as a matter of course, moral, how much further must he be from demonstrating his further contention that we are growing more so? Progress is measurable only when attached to a previously stated teleology; it is impossible to chart the progress of a runner in a race without first knowing the location of the finish line. Without that knowledge, progress and regress, furtherance and errancy, are indistinguishable from one another. Likewise, given some previously determined ethical program, progress may indeed prove measurable, but only because the program provides a teleology against which to compare changes. It could be said, of course, that any movement away from a point of origin is progress of some sort, but when the goal is to chart a specific course toward greater morality, mere trajectory is not enough. It must be a trajectory toward some identifiable goal. Nevertheless, the notion that religion stands in the way of the natural progression of our moral faculty forms an integral part of not only his critique, but that of the other Horsemen as well. If, for example, we say that the intended end of morality is to make the good attainable, we are still driven back onto ethics to explain what we mean by "good." This, of course, is one of the enduring questions of philosophy, and it is Dawkins' contention that we are

demonstrably closer to having found the answer. Curiously, to support that claim, he is driven back on the sort of mystification that he deplores in religious thought.

Unless we are able to treat the end of ethics as a foregone conclusion, progress and regress remain largely matters of perspective. Dawkins attempts to circumvent this limitation by treating the current state of ethical thought as one point on a linear progression, allowing him to chart the trajectory of morality as though on a graph. In other words, he simply judges the morality of previous eras by the standards of our own. He thereby privileges present norms, arguing that, "The shift is in a recognizably consistent direction, which most of us would judge an improvement."<sup>20</sup> Problems riddle that methodology, but the most prominent may be a form of the fallacy known as *post hoc ergo propter hoc*, literally: "after this, therefore because of this." By that account, the end of moral progression is necessarily implied in the present state, but not because Dawkins has found a logical answer to the central question of how we know what is and is not moral. He has simply assumed that whatever is closest to us must, as a matter of course, be superior to whatever came before.

In the place of logical justification, he proposes a mechanism to explain the as yet undemonstrated progressive direction of history. "In any society," he explains, "there exists a somewhat mysterious consensus, which changes over the decades, and for which it is not pretentious to use the German loan-word *Zeitgeist* (spirit of the times)."<sup>21</sup> If we interpret the word to mean nothing more than "common assent" it is at least plausible, though pitifully weak. Dawkins would hardly defer to popular opinion on the question of whether or not God exists, and he gives no compelling reason why we should be any more populist when it comes to ethical questions. More strikingly, Dawkins has staked his argument for moral progress on a concept that, coming from a professed physicalist, ought to astonish the reader. It would probably go too far to suggest that Dawkins holds the moral *zeitgeist* to be a thing with independent existence. In that case, his moral *zeitgeist* argument against religion would merely substitute one undemonstrated entity for another, replacing God with a spirit that is preferable only because it would presumably be subject to evolution. Without a more substantive clue from Dawkins, it may be that the best we can do is to envision a range of plausible interpretations that fill by degrees the gulf between *zeitgeist* as a metaphor for common assent, and *zeitgeist* as a kind of patron spirit.

In the interests of taking his argument seriously, let us consider something close to the middle of the scale. Common assent is too obvious a fallacy; a

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<sup>20</sup> *TGD*, 304

<sup>21</sup> *TGD*, 300-301

literal spirit makes him subject to his own objections. To be useful in this context *zeitgeist* must shoulder several burdens. It must be *substantive* enough to be discernible as more than mere abstraction; *effective* enough to result in palpable changes in conduct; *persistent* enough, and yet *mutable* enough, to make it subject to progressive change; *pervasive* enough to encompass the majority of those living in the age of its patronage; and yet *fundamental* enough to serve as a reliable arbiter of ethical truth. These requirements are interdependent. If we suppose, for example, that the moral *zeitgeist* need not be any more substantive than mere abstraction, that supposition obliges us to account for how it could be, at the same time, effective, mutable, and fundamental.

Many of the difficulties entailed by these requirements could perhaps be resolved in a worldview that allowed for the existence of spirits, but in the context of strict materialistic naturalism, the nature of such a *zeitgeist* proves more difficult to assess. Dawkins himself leaves even the most basic question – what is the moral *zeitgeist*? – frustratingly unresolved. “It is,” he writes, “beyond my amateur psychology and sociology to go any further into explaining why the *Zeitgeist* moves in its broadly concerted way. For my purposes it is enough that, as a matter of observed fact, it *does* move, and it is not driven by religion – and certainly not by scripture.”<sup>22</sup> It may be considered ungenerous to suggest that his wholesale credulity for the *zeitgeist* explanation is, after all, a product of that “amateur psychology and sociology.” Given the logical problems raised by his advocacy of both it and the notion of steady moral Progress, it becomes positively necessary to ask whether they really are, as he claims, matters of “observed fact.”

Consider the evidence. He declares the century long spread of women’s suffrage “a gauge of the shifting *Zeitgeist*”; so too is the decline of racism. He neglects to mention that the racial doctrines of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were mostly an invention of 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century Europeans attempting to justify their revival of institutional slavery. Women’s suffrage may seem a more clear-cut instance of progress, but it makes sense primarily within the context of a democratic political system; viewed from the perspective of ancient Minoan, Berber, Basque, Mosuo, and Tuareg societies – all of which were to one extent or another matriarchal – the form of our political system would seem more remarkable than the fact of women’s participation in it. Dawkins suggests that such variance counts as a statistical hiccup at best, “local and temporary setbacks” in the “sawtoothed” progression of history,<sup>23</sup> but the point is that the apparent solidity of a moral *zeitgeist* is similar to

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<sup>22</sup> TGD, 308

<sup>23</sup> TGD, 307

that of a rainbow: whether or not you see it at all depends on where you choose to stand and where you decline to look.<sup>24</sup>

Some sense of how much effort has gone into making that *zeitgeist* seem plausible can be discerned when Dawkins favorably compares Hitler to Genghis Khan. Hitler, he will admit, likely had the higher body count, but somehow Dawkins feels that is mitigated by advances in technology – as though the very fact of having given genocide a methodology did not, in itself, constitute an innovation in immorality. But the final word for Dawkins is the Khan's reputation for sadism. "Hitler," Dawkins insists, "seems especially evil only by the more benign standards of our time."<sup>25</sup> True, we necessarily "judge Hitler's degree of evil by the standards of today," but it is a mockery to call those standards more benign. Rather, our standards have changed precisely to the extent that Hitler's example confronts us with the mobilization of an entire society, otherwise recognizably civil, into an apparatus for the mechanical destruction of an entire people, not for simple material gain, nor from an excess of passion, nor even from an neurological inclination towards sadism, but rather in the service of nationalism, and in the pursuit of an ideal society. Precisely because major historical and philosophical shifts went into setting the stage for it, the Holocaust represents a peak of immorality to which Genghis Khan could never have aspired.

Because it represents such a low moral ebb, softening our impression of the immorality of the Holocaust is necessary if Dawkins hopes to convince us of the morally progressive trend in history. Not only does he fail to establish that trend; when asked to explain how progressively higher morals emerge, he replies, "The onus is not on me to answer. For my purposes it is sufficient that they certainly have not come from religion."<sup>26</sup> It is impossible to avoid a touch of embarrassment at feeling it necessary to critique so palpably outdated and naïve a notion as that of a progressive moral *zeitgeist*,<sup>27</sup> or to argue against the suggestion that there was nothing "especially evil" about the Holocaust. That a book which features those positions so

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<sup>24</sup> The historical position Dawkins assumes in order to achieve the illusion is also discussed at the end of "The Flattening of Historical Perspective"; the debt his view owes to historical tradition is compassed in "The Heirs of *La Coterie Holbachique*."

<sup>25</sup> *TGD*, 304-305

<sup>26</sup> *TGD*, 306

<sup>27</sup> It should be noted that neither Herder – who was, like his intellectual predecessor Giambattista Vico, an historical fatalist – nor Hegel – with whom the term is most often associated – seem to have regarded *zeitgeist* as necessarily progressive, only descriptive of the character of an age.



prominently has made such an impact on the public discussion demonstrates precisely how short-sighted a *zeitgeist* can be. It suggests that we are already able to see two of the most costly and fatal wars in history – fought by millions, spanning multiple continents and separated by a span of less than two decades – as mere glitches in an otherwise upward trend, when they might more reasonably indicate a moral decline.



Neither Harris nor Hitchens espouse anything quite so crudely drawn as Dawkins' moral *Zeitgeist*, but the premise of a progressive moral consensus is implied by both. In *God Is Not Great* it appears mostly in the contrast between the moral scheme devised by stone age nomads, and what any 21<sup>st</sup> schoolchild may be expected to know. Since, in Hitchens' view of history, our remote ancestors were simply doing the best they could with a limited intellectual and educational tools, that makes it just possible to interpret moral progress as a corollary of mental progress, much as the 19<sup>th</sup> century anthropologists who influenced Freud did.<sup>28</sup>

Harris, at least, seems to have recognized the problems entailed by the attempt to derive an evolutionary moral basis that is not only descriptive but also prescriptive. *The Moral Landscape* finds him at pains to assure the reader that, "a scientific account of human values [...] is not the same as an *evolutionary* account."<sup>29</sup> His insistence on that point may derive from worries that an evolutionary account will open the door to moral relativism. To that end, he writes,

If morality is simply an adaptive means of organizing social behavior and mitigating conflict, there would be no reason to think that our current sense of right and wrong would reflect any deeper understanding about the nature of reality. Hence, a narrow focus explaining why people think and behave as they do can lead a person to find the idea of 'moral truth' literally unintelligible.<sup>30</sup>

Nevertheless, toward the end of the book, he writes, "Despite our perennial bad behavior, our moral progress seems to me unmistakable."<sup>31</sup> The next

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<sup>28</sup> See "The Heirs of *La Coterie Holbachique*" for the line of discursive descent.

<sup>29</sup> *TML*, 13

<sup>30</sup> *TML*, 50

<sup>31</sup> *TML*, 177

stage in that progress, as he would have it, is to restructure ethics as a branch of science.

When Harris writes, "my approach is to generally make an end run around many of the views and conceptual distinctions that make academic discussions of human values so inaccessible,"<sup>32</sup> the passage proves telling in more ways than one. It is, in the first place, ironic that he should think it necessary to do so in a book that positively embraces academic discussions from other disciplines, not least of all his own doctoral thesis in neuroscience. In fact, the rhetorical strategy that makes his argument possible is premised on side-stepping not only the jargon, but also some of the core issues of ethical philosophy. He does so by eschewing the basic terms to which they pertain: *good* and *ought*. The first of those he demotes to a subsidiary position; the second he consigns to the waste bin. Without them, it is no longer clear that he is talking about what most of us would recognize as morality.

That is particularly evident in the case of *ought*, which Harris dismisses as "an artificial and needlessly confusing way to think about moral choice."<sup>33</sup> Despite the philosophical coup it would represent were Harris to successfully dispense with *ought* altogether, the maneuver itself takes place almost entirely in a pair of endnotes.<sup>34</sup> It hinges, in the first place, on a confusion between contingent and categorical justification. By contingent, I mean that the reasons offered are justified by their tendency to promote a limited goal. That goal is typically expressed by some conditional statement, indicated by the presence of the word *if*. A simple example would be the proposition, "If you do not wish to be hungry, you ought to eat breakfast," where the clause beginning with *if* is the condition on which the *ought* clause is predicated.

In order to evade that burden, Harris argues that, "Asking why we 'ought' to value well-being, makes even less sense than asking why we 'ought' to be rational or scientific." The analogy is false. There are demonstrable, though contingent, reasons for practicing reason or science. Consider, for example, the claim, "*If* your goal is to make a model of the solar system that will allow you to accurately predict the next solar eclipse, you *ought* to be scientific about it." That argument requires a fairly complex demonstration, but at root it represents an extension of the basic form of contingent justification, "If you want *x*, you ought to do *y*." Contingent premises can, of course, be denied, even in the face of demonstration, by

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<sup>32</sup> *TML*, 197, fn. 197

<sup>33</sup> *TML*, 38

<sup>34</sup> *TML*, 203-204, fn. 21 and fn. 22

anyone stubborn enough to do so, but as a practical matter, a conditional argument is best proved by doing.

We might even go so far as to describe the history of scientific method as an iterative process of contingent justification. Every time we successfully apply scientific method to a contingent problem, we further justify our preference for science as a mode of inquiry. By contrast, Harris attempts to sketch the outlines of a categorical justification – that is, justification that arises from the nature of the thing or category to which it belongs, rather than from its use in achieving some desired goal. “Scientific ‘is’ statements,” he insists, “rest on implicit ‘oughts’ all the way down.” To argue in favor of a scientific conclusion by reference to data is to “implicitly appeal to the values of empiricism and logic.” He does not tell us how empiricism and logic came to be values unto themselves. They are more traditionally regarded as methods or methodological assumptions. We may value them for their practical utility, but in doing so we rely on contingent justification. The subtle shift by which he converts them into values recalls the historical process by which the *philosophes* converted the faculty reason into the ideal of Reason. We do well here to remember that *The Moral Landscape* belongs to a triptych of a books advocating an updated Rationalism.<sup>35</sup>

The unqualified use of *ought* in ethical philosophy is often used to imply categorical justification. That proves especially true of deontological ethics, but even a consequentialist ethics is justified with reference to what consequences we ought to seek. It is by no means clear how, without something like *ought*, there can be, as Harris repeatedly insists there are, right or wrong answers to questions of morality. Yet, perversely, it is on that very premise that he recommends letting “this metaphysical notion of ‘ought’ fall away.” In its place, “we will be left with a scientific picture of cause and effect.”<sup>36</sup> Here again we find a shift away from a theory that prescribes conduct, and toward one that only describes the decision-making process. What remains is a form of behaviorism, not morality or ethics. Yet even the attempt to fit such a behaviorism into a scientific program requires at least the sort of prescriptive *ought* statements that figure in contingent justifications, e.g. *if* your goal as a biologist is to minimize the effects of dengue fever, then you *ought* to support programs that work towards the development of a vaccine. In any case, once we remove the question of what we as deliberative agents ought to do or ought to seek, the result is no longer recognizable as morality or ethics. Harris seems to recognize as much when he writes, “that science can, in principle, help us understand

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<sup>35</sup> See “The Heirs of *La Coterie Holbachique*.”

<sup>36</sup> *TML*, 204, fn. 22

what we *should* do and *should* want,<sup>37</sup> though he neither explains how that differs from understanding what we *ought* to do and *ought* to want. It may be that he simply hopes to evade the philosophical burden imposed by Hume's *is-ought* problem by doing away with one term, *ought*, while employing another, *should*, that retains the same prescriptive sense. But that prescriptive sense is, after all, the real subject of Hume's critique.

Ultimately, any ethics that deals only with the conditionals set by some other discipline (e.g. physics, economics, medicine) will be beholden to the goals of that discipline. To accept that ethics is subordinate to the sciences is to forfeit the capacity to use ethics to judge the goals of those sciences. The traditional task of ethics is that of finding non-contingent, logically compelling reasons for specific programs of conduct, and has been recognized as such at least since the Socratic dialogues of Plato. Given its role in ancient Greek ethics, Harris' diagnosis of the role of *ought* as "another dismal product of Abrahamic religion" requires a patently unlikely stretch of the imagination, and is best regarded as an offhand attempt to stoke the fires of his beloved zero-sum conflict between religion and science.

In a footnote,<sup>38</sup> Harris marks a broader than usual territory for the latter:

For the purposes of this discussion, I do not intend to make a hard distinction between "science" and other intellectual contexts in which we discuss "facts" – e.g., history. [...] I think "science," therefore, should be considered a specialized branch of a larger effort to form true beliefs about events in our world.<sup>39</sup>

This reconnects his inquiry to Hume's *is-ought* problem. Harris seems to interpret that challenge more strictly than Hume did, presenting it as the argument "that no description of the way the world is (facts) can tell us how we ought to behave (morality)."<sup>40</sup> Strictly speaking, Hume's formulation does not declare it impossible to derive a statement of *ought* from a statement of *is*, and so, at least in principle, it may still be possible to found ethical theory on ontological verity. That said, a correct understanding of

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<sup>37</sup> *TML*, 28

<sup>38</sup> *TML*, 195 fn. 2

<sup>39</sup> The second sentence connects the aims of *The Moral Landscape* to Harris' discussion of belief in *The End of Faith*, concerning which, see "The Diagnostics of Belief."

<sup>40</sup> *TML*, 10

the problem burdens Harris with the responsibility for grounding prescriptive claims in a context of epistemic theory.

That bad paraphrase of Hume reflects a general confusion that extends to Harris' treatment of the most influential of 20<sup>th</sup> century ethical treatises, the *Principia Ethica*.<sup>41</sup> "Following Hume," Harris writes,

the philosopher G. E. Moore declared that any attempt to locate moral truths in the natural world was to commit a 'naturalistic fallacy.' Moore argued that goodness could not be equated with any property of human experience (e.g., pleasure, happiness, evolutionary fitness) because it would always be appropriate to ask whether the property on offer was itself *good*.

This misses the mark in several important particulars. In the first place, no direct logical connection ties the naturalistic fallacy to Hume's *is-ought* problem. They burden the ethicist for different reasons. Mistaking the naturalistic fallacy for an elaboration of Hume's *is-ought* problem allows Harris to surreptitiously set Hume almost entirely aside, preferring to deal directly with Moore instead.

To understand the naturalistic fallacy, it is necessary to begin with the premise that the principle subject of ethics, i.e. good, can never be defined in terms of something else. Any attempt to define the good as though it were a complex object betrays the definition as false, since "'good' is, in fact, except its converse 'bad,' the *only* simple object of thought which is peculiar to Ethics,"<sup>42</sup> and must be so if the discipline hopes to avoid logical contradiction. In Moore's example,

You can give a definition of a horse, because a horse has many different properties and qualities, all of which you can enumerate. But when you have enumerated them all, when you have reduced a horse to his simplest terms, you can no longer define those terms. They are simply something which you think of or perceive, and to anyone who cannot think of or perceive them, you can never, by any definition, make their nature known.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> 1903

<sup>42</sup> *Principia Ethica*, I§5

<sup>43</sup> *Principia Ethica*, I§7

Ultimately, “good” is recognizable only by its function; that is, by the quality we mean to attach to a thing, behavior, or goal when we say that it is “good.”

Only having acknowledged that background may we also understand what Moore meant when he proposed the naturalistic fallacy. He explains it thus:

It may be true that all things which are good are *also* something else, just as it is true that all things which are yellow produce a certain kind of vibration in the light. And it is a fact, that Ethics aims at discovering what are those other properties belonging to all things which are good. But far too many philosophers have thought that when they named those other properties they were actually defining good; that these properties, in fact, were simply not “other,” but absolutely and entirely the same with goodness.<sup>44</sup>

It is not then, as Harris supposes, that an ethicist commits the fallacy any time she attempts to locate moral truth in the world. In part, he seems to have been led astray by Moore’s use of the term “naturalistic,” an unfortunate name for the mistake he had in mind, since it has often been interpreted to mean that the good must belong to the realm of metaphysics. In point of fact, Moore does not consider good a natural object, but is quick to qualify that, “Even if it were a natural object, that would not alter the nature of the fallacy nor diminish its importance one whit.”<sup>45</sup> It is a mistake, then, to think that Moore’s assertion of a naturalistic fallacy necessarily means that a metaphysical ethics is preferable to a naturalistic ethics. On his own account, both naturalistic and metaphysical ethical systems may be subject to the fallacy,<sup>46</sup> which is “naturalistic” only in that it involves misidentifying the *nature* of good.

Harris attempts to illustrate the fallacy by writing that, “If, for instance, we were to say that goodness is synonymous with whatever gives people pleasure, it would still be possible to worry whether a specific instance of pleasure is actually *good*. This is known as Moore’s ‘open question argument.’”<sup>47</sup> In fact, the naturalistic fallacy and the open question argument are related, but distinct. Moore himself illustrates the latter by showing that “in some cases there is a conflict between the common

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<sup>44</sup> *Principia Ethica*, I§10

<sup>45</sup> *Principia Ethica*, I§12

<sup>46</sup> *Principia Ethica*, II§24 & §25

<sup>47</sup> *TML*, 10

judgment that genius is good, and the common judgment that health is good.”<sup>48</sup> That being so, they cannot both be good in themselves, and so something else must account for their goodness. No doubt the premises that lead to that conflict can be disputed, but the example is only meant to illustrate the sort of conflict that arises when the association between good and some property purported to be good is left open.

The argument itself arises as a necessary consequence of any attempt to assign the meaning of good to some object (natural or otherwise) not previously identified as good. So long as it remains logically possible to ask whether or not *x* really is good, the question remains “open.” The question is only “closed” when the structure of the definition makes it nonsensical to ask whether *x* really is good. Harris’ example – the proposition that “goodness is synonymous with whatever gives people pleasure” – does, in fact, remain open, simply because it remains possible to ask whether what gives people pleasure really is good in itself.<sup>49</sup> That preserves the possibility of the sort of conflict we see in Moore’s example. If, for example, we were also to stipulate that good is whatever gives people most control over their own faculties, then we might well find the two in conflict, since drunkenness may give pleasure at the expense of self-control.

The important distinction to bear in mind is that the Harris’ formula falls prey to the naturalistic fallacy, not because it leaves the question open, but because it inadvertently identifies the good as both a means and an end. The open question argument only suggests the fallacy. Explicitly, Harris’ formula locates good not in pleasure, but in the category of objects that give pleasure. But when asked why those objects are synonymous with goodness, the obvious answer is, “because they give people pleasure.” To say that pleasure is the goal of ethics is to say that pleasure is good. Therefore, the premise that “goodness is synonymous with whatever gives people pleasure” translates into “good is synonymous with whatever leads to good.” It is precisely because such formulae, as definitions, seem consistently to unravel into nonsense of this sort that Moore proposed the

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<sup>48</sup> *Principia Ethica*, II§27; the illustration depends upon the premises i) that a purely scientific (as opposed to ethical) definition of health will hinge on the assessment of normalcy, and ii) that genius is defined by its deviation from the norm. It follows that genius is, by definition, unhealthy; ergo, if genius is good, that good is in conflict with the good of health, since genius is also unhealthy.

<sup>49</sup> In a dialogue that anticipates much of *Principia Ethica* – the *Philebus* – Plato concludes that the variability of pleasure likewise disqualifies it as the exclusive good. All we can say for sure of pleasure is that it is pleasant; any goodness that adheres to it must be incidental to that intrinsic nature.

naturalistic fallacy. Harris' apparent failure to recognize what Moore actually contributed to the practice of ethical philosophy has left him unprepared to avoid such constructions.



Most of the contradictions plaguing *The Moral Landscape* proceed from Harris' failure to take seriously what Moore describes as the central problem of ethics, the nature of good. We could, if we chose, replace "good" with some equivalent term, and a great many attempts to resolve the persistent difficulties of ethics have hinged on doing just that. But to any question of why we *ought* to behave *thus*, the answer will ultimately be reducible to the form, "because it *is* good to do so"; to the question of why we ought to value *this* rather than *that*, the answer will ultimately be reducible to the form, "because *this is* good, and *that is not* as good." That is not to say that we cannot with a high degree of fidelity translate "good" from its adjectival form into equivalent, but non-adjectival, language. If we were to declare, "charity is good," we could perhaps translate that into the equivalent declaration that, "one ought to be charitable." But when asked, "why ought one be charitable?" any answer we give will ultimately revert back to the adjectival form, i.e. "because charity is good." That may seem like an invitation to play ultimately meaningless semantic games, but understanding the act of translating good into roughly equivalent language proves crucial in light of Harris' construction of a moral landscape, as will be explained in due course.

If, then, morality and ethics represent the attempt to answer the question, "what ought to be done?" then "good" is the most promising answer, but its value in ethical thought is roughly algebraic. In some sense, it is only a predicted value. Much as modern physics concerns itself with inquiring into the nature of predicted values, like the Higgs Boson and parallel universes, the defining problem of all ethics since Socrates has been the inquiry into the nature of good. Even the difference between consequentialism and deontology can be rendered in terms of where each locates the notion of good – in consequences, and in rules, respectively. Most attempts to bypass the centrality of good can be shown to translate back into equivalent language, either with no loss of meaning or with an appreciable increase in coherence.

It is, then, of no small consequence that Harris has attempted to reconstruct the entire field of moral inquiry on a new foundation, that of "well-being." In light of the preceding, we shall want to know how well-being differs from good, as well as why we should prefer one over the other. It could be argued that nearly the whole of *The Moral Landscape* is devoted



to answering the latter question. Put briefly, it is by elevating the notion of well-being, even above the traditional status of good, that Harris proposes to construct a science of universal morality. "Human and animal well being are natural phenomenon," he insists. "As such, they can be studied, in principle, with the tools of science and spoken about with greater or lesser precision."<sup>50</sup>

Before we can do that, however, we will need to know what is meant by well-being. Since *The Moral Landscape* declines to frame it in precise terms, a process of elimination will be needed to narrow down the field. Well-being could be, first of all, nothing more than a synonym for good, perfectly comparable in every important regard. In fact, Harris sometimes employs the term as though they were equivalent. It seems unlikely, though, that he proposed well-being as an exact stand in for good, since perfect synonymy would accomplish none of the things Harris intends for his ethical scheme – such as rendering it sufficiently descriptive to qualify as a science. If well-being is to resolve the *is-ought* problem, it must bring something to the table not already encompassed by good.

Yet Harris often talks about well-being as though it were just that. "It seems uncontroversial," he writes, "to say that a change that leaves everyone worse off, by any rational standard, can be reasonably called 'bad,' if this word is to have any meaning at all."<sup>51</sup> In fact, it must be uncontroversial by definition, since "worse" is only a comparative form of the word "bad." As such, the formula proves nothing that it has not already assumed. Roughly half of Harris' strategy for preserving the possibility of moral truth is built on the maneuver of front-loading the very values he hopes to discover; the other half resides in declaring it impossible to imagine it any other way. A basic familiarity with grammar will show that he mostly only uses "well" as the adverbial form of the adjective "good." He seems close to recognizing their near interchangeability when he writes that, "it makes no sense at all to ask whether maximizing well-being is 'good.'"<sup>52</sup> As often as not, it would only be translating well-being into equivalent language to describe it as "the state of being appropriately valued as good."

That transitivity proves to be of the first consequence to Harris' solution to the challenges outlined by *Principia Ethica*. "If we define 'good,'" he writes, "as that which supports well-being, as I will argue we must, the regress initiated by Moore's 'open question argument' really does stop."<sup>53</sup> It

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<sup>50</sup> *TML*, 41-42

<sup>51</sup> *TML*, 39

<sup>52</sup> *TML*, 12

<sup>53</sup> *TML*, 12

would, in fact, require some effort to leave the question more open. If his formula amounted to *good* = *well-being*, that would, it could be argued, effectively close the question, since well-being would then only translate good into a state description, making it impossible to reasonably question whether or not good really *is* well-being. Rather, according to Harris' formula, *good* = *x*, where *x* is whatever results in well-being; *x* cannot, then, also be well-being, and thus *good* ≠ *well-being*. Even then, *good* = *x* leaves the definition open to exactly the sort of conflict illustrated by Moore's health/genius example. In a region where over-population leads to a great deal of suffering, for example, *x* could be some disease that reduces population levels. Staying true to Harris' formula, then, we would have to say that disease is, at least in that case, good – except that we may also clearly see that the same disease would be anything but good to those parts of the population it has served to reduce. Thus, though it may be possible in some cases to describe “that which supports well-being” as good, we cannot *define* good as “that which supports well-being” without inviting logical contradiction.

And contradictions of that sort do, in fact, crop up in Harris' consideration of well-being. To the rhetorical question, “Are all human lives equivalent?” he answers,

No. I have no problem admitting that certain people's lives are more valuable than mine (I need only imagine a person whose death would create much greater suffering and prevent much greater happiness). However, it also seems quite rational for us to collectively act *as though* all human lives were equally valuable. Hence, most of our laws and social institutions generally ignore differences between people. I suspect that this is a very good thing.<sup>54</sup>

This strongly suggests that well-being can be trumped by some other moral value – e.g. good – that has otherwise remained covert. The more damning problem, then, is not the open question argument, but that Harris' definition of good presents an almost quintessential instance of the naturalistic fallacy. The definition he offers translates into, “good is that which supports the state of being appropriately valued as good.” The repetition of “good” betrays how he has mistaken the properties that attend the good for the nature of good itself.

We can, in fact, see the effects of that confusion in the way *The Moral Landscape* sometimes treats well-being as the product of good, and sometimes treats it as synonymous with good. Thus, to justify the claim that

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<sup>54</sup> *TML*, 199 fn. 8

we can dismiss the objections of psychopaths on no stronger grounds than that their opinions are simply not worth considering, Harris argues, "It is absolutely clear that, whatever they might believe about what they are doing, psychopaths are seeking some form of well-being (excitement, ecstasy, feelings of power, etc.), but because of their neurological and social deficits, they are doing a very bad job of it."<sup>55</sup> Astute readers of Plato will recognize the argument from *Protagoras*, where it is used to demonstrate that those who appear to prefer some evil to the good are simply seeking after what they mistakenly take to be a greater good. Harris' adaptation of the argument works so long as we accept well-being as a synonym for good, but if we have already followed him in defining good as subordinate to well-being, it makes no sense to talk of mistaking well-being for excitement, ecstasy, or feelings of power.

Psychopathy represents the sort of extreme example that Harris favors throughout his books. It would be easy to interpret his reliance on such extremes as nothing more than a fondness for hyperbole, except that they also play a part in obscuring the relationship between good and well-being. While it may be true that "no one wants utter, interminable misery," that may be only because we find it impossible to find any good in the total absence of well-being, and does not mean that good and well-being are synonymous apart from that scenario. When we insist on dealing with them in the middle degrees of experience, apart from an abstraction like "*the worst possible misery for everyone*,"<sup>56</sup> it grows increasingly difficult to maintain a coherent notion of well-being that is not judged according to some distinct conception of good.

Another possibility, though not so promising, is that well-being is synonymous with health. Harris raises that possibility himself by his analogies, but he stops short of definitively identifying the two with one another. As well he should, since to do so would undermine his assertion that well-being can be relied upon as the sole arbiter of moral value. Health is a diagnostic term, without independent moral value. Moore goes so far as to insist that we calibrate our assessment of health with a prior judgment concerning what is good. We can say that it is moral to seek our own health and the health of others, but a narrow focus on health alone tends, as Nietzsche well knew, to eliminate moral categories altogether.

Harris fails to explain why we should not consider the two exactly equivalent. In fact, he presents the analogy as though it altogether excuses him from the need for defining well-being at all. "The concept of 'well-being,' like the concept of 'health,' is truly open for revision and

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<sup>55</sup> *TML*, 204-205, fn. 24

<sup>56</sup> *TML*, 41

discovery,”<sup>57</sup> he argues. The suggestion that the ambiguity of the one term should justify the ambiguity of the other implies a categorical relation between the them. If nothing else, that leaves open the possibility that both terms could be revised into perfect congruence with one another. But can we accept at face value the claim that the concept of health is “truly open for revision?” It seems to me that it is perfectly possible to give the concept of health a resilient, enduring definition, and that what actually changes over time is our understanding of what promotes health. In fact, those changes would be incomprehensible were they not undergirded by a consistent notion of what is meant by “health.”

Would it not, for example, be consistent with most, if not all, biological uses of the term, past and present, to say that health is *the state optimal for ensuring persistent bodily function in living organisms*? To test the resilience of that definition, consider the practice of amputation. To amputate a leg may seem, by that definition, categorically unhealthy, since that portion of the body will neither continue to function, nor remain part of a living organism. But if the leg is gangrenous, then amputation may fall within the purview of health, since that will be the *optimal* way, given the circumstances, to ensure the continued function of the rest of the body. Leaving the leg intact may, in the short term, provide a broader range of function, but amputating to prevent the spread of gangrene will better ensure the continued function of more of the body over a longer period of time. When Harris argues that, “Our notion of ‘health’ may one day be defined by goals that we cannot currently entertain with a straight face (like the goal of spontaneously regenerating a lost limb),”<sup>58</sup> he is actually talking about changes in standards, not definitions. Those standards, though, are premised on a largely unchanging definition, and we could not recognize such changes in standards without some such prior conception.

Harris’ analogy, then, does nothing to excuse his omission of a proper definition of well-being. Moreover, his refusal to provide one renders dubious his suggestion that science could be called in to track changes in our standard for well-being, since those standards would only be comprehensible in terms of a definition that remains valid in spite of such changes. As such, there can be no genuine continuity between differing definitions, and thus no real progress, only wholesale revisions and unresolvable conflict. But that, as we shall consider presently, may be just the result Harris had in mind.

Finally, we may reject the identification of well-being with health on ethical grounds. If, in the final analysis, the only things meant to distinguish

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<sup>57</sup> *TML*, 34

<sup>58</sup> *TML*, 35-36

health and well-being are their names and the moral value Harris attaches to the latter, the moral landscape again risks entailing the sort of contradiction suggested by Moore's open question argument. Harris writes, "The distinction between a healthy person and a dead one is about as clear and consequential as any we make in science."<sup>59</sup> Though I suspect that some doctors might disagree with Harris' assessment, we may put aside for now the question of whether or not that distinction really proves as clear as he supposes. The more prickly question is whether or not Harris would be willing to entertain a conception of health that encompassed death as a viable alternative to life. What would he say, for example, if someone were to argue that it is healthier to die on one's own terms than to live another century by taking a drug that will radically inhibit their moral sense? It could defensibly be argued that a voluntary natural death would be the moral choice, drawing it into direct conflict with the premise that good is reducible to a death-averse conception of health. On the bases of all these objections, we may say that the analogy to health does more to confuse the issues than it does to clarify them

If well-being is neither synonymous with good, nor analogous to health, there remains a third option available to anyone who hopes to maintain its value as the pivot of an ethical theory. Earlier I wrote that the elevation of well-being to the central issue of ethical inquiry prompts us to ask both how well-being differs from good, and why we should prefer one over the other. Harris provides one answer when he writes that, "The moment we begin thinking about morality in terms of well-being, it becomes remarkably easy to discern a moral hierarchy across human societies."<sup>60</sup> This follows from the premise, "that certain cultures are less suited to maximizing well-being than others."<sup>61</sup> It would seem that this is more than an unintended consequence, and part of my suggestion here is that Harris has proposed his moral landscape specifically for the purpose of grounding judgments about other cultures in scientific authority. In fact, to call it a "moral landscape" suggests – as did one of the slides Harris presented when he first introduced the term<sup>62</sup> – that it possesses something it manifestly does not: a third dimension. The book describes it in strictly two dimensional terms, suggestive of a cross-section rather than a landscape. In the concluding

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<sup>59</sup> *TML*, 12

<sup>60</sup> *TML*, 60

<sup>61</sup> *TML*, 43

<sup>62</sup> In a talk given at the February 2010 Technology, Entertainment, Design (TED) Conference, entitled "Science can answer moral questions," and accessible at [http://www.ted.com/talks/sam\\_harris\\_science\\_can\\_show\\_what\\_s\\_right.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/sam_harris_science_can_show_what_s_right.html)

chapter we read that, "One of the virtues of thinking about a moral landscape, the heights of which remain to be discovered, is that it frees us from these semantic difficulties. Generally speaking, we need only worry about what it means to move 'up' as opposed to 'down.'" <sup>63</sup> On the whole, the term "moral hierarchy" seems a more accurate evocation of the scheme Harris presents.

That two-dimensionality is likely responsible for the accusations of cultural imperialism leveled by many of his critics. At times, Harris even codifies cultural differences as inhabiting a quasi-evolutionary divide. Thus, in discussing his own moral indignation over the overtures made to his wife by a would-be suitor, he writes that,

there are many different ways for an ape to respond to the fact that other apes find his wife desirable. Had this happened in a traditional honor culture, the jealous husband might beat his wife, drag her to the gym, and force her to identify her suitor so that he could put a bullet in his brain. [...] There are many communities on earth where men commonly behave this way, and hundreds of millions of boys are beginning to run this ancient software on their brains even now.

The alternating animal and mechanical natures he attributes to what he regards as a morally inferior culture are contrasted in the next paragraph by his own agency and moral superiority. Hence, "my own mind shows some precarious traces of civilization: one being that I view the emotion of jealousy with suspicion. What is more, I happen to love my wife and genuinely want her to be happy, and this entails a certain empathetic understanding of her point of view." <sup>64</sup> Clearly, Harris feels none of the compulsion "to pay intellectual reparations for the crimes of western colonialism, ethnocentrism, and racism" that, in his capacity as armchair psychologist, he attributes to moral relativists.

The developmental difference he locates between his own reaction and that which he attributes to members of other cultures naturally recalls the clash of civilizations described in *The End of Faith* and *Letter to a Christian Nation*. "I found myself," opines one of *The Moral Landscape*'s reviewers, <sup>65</sup> "wishing for less of the polemic against religion, which recurs often and takes up one entire chapter – he has had two bites of that apple

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<sup>63</sup> *TML*, 183

<sup>64</sup> *TML*, 51-52

<sup>65</sup> "Science Knows Best," Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The New York Times*, October 1, 2010.

already, and will soon be reduced to gnawing at the core.” This misses the point. There is no evidence that Harris’ goal of resettling morality on a purely scientific foundation was ever distinct from his polemic against religion. “The defense one most often hears for belief in God,” he claims, “is not that there is compelling evidence for His existence, but that faith in Him is the only reliable source of meaning and moral guidance. Mutually incompatible religious traditions now take refuge behind the same non sequitur.”<sup>66</sup> If the polemic of his previous work recurs in *The Moral Landscape*, it may be because the author is less interested in changing the way we derive ethical conclusions than in depriving religion of its last refuge.

The same reviewer writes that Harris “ends up endorsing is something very like utilitarianism,” but this, too, strikes me as a mistake – though, based on the frequency with which critics have made the association, an apparently quite common one. Rather, the scheme presented by *The Moral Landscape* has more in common with American pragmatism, the school of thought first suggested by Charles Sanders Pierce in the 1870s, developed by William James, and represented more recently by such luminaries as Richard Rorty and W. V. O. Quine.<sup>67</sup> Consider, for example, one defense that Harris marshals in defense of the moral landscape, to the effect that,

anyone who has an alternative set of moral axioms is free to put them forward, just as they are free to define “science” any way they want. But some definitions will be useless, or worse – and many current definitions of “morality” are so bad that we can know, far in advance of any breakthrough in the sciences of mind, that they have no place in a serious conversation about how we should live in this world.<sup>68</sup>

Their designation as “useless or worse” suggests that Harris intends to judge any proposed ethical inquiry by the practical ends to which it may be put – a recognizably pragmatic standard. Thus, the premise that values are facts about the well-being of conscious creatures aligns with the pragmatist view that ethical theory ought to be concerned with ensuring the consistency of programs that we, as ethical agents, decide upon. As such, the moral landscape figures as a tool in what Rorty called “the search for adjustment,

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<sup>66</sup> *TML*, 6-7

<sup>67</sup> Dennett was a pupil of Quine’s, and has cited James as an “intellectual hero”; cf. *BtS*, 20.

<sup>68</sup> *TML*, 41

and in particular that sort of adjustment to our fellow humans which we call 'the search for acceptable justification and eventual agreement.'"<sup>69</sup>

Given that similarity, the effort to find some prior logical foundation for the concept of well-being may prove misguided. Harris' argument simply does not work that way, no matter how sincerely he insists that it must. Therein lies the answer to how well-being is defined – it is left quite simply, and quite deliberately, undefined. Under his guidance, "well-being" becomes a kind of short-hand for whatever value he wishes to place there. Ultimately, all that justifies it is the promise of the practical use to which it may be put. That allows Harris to insist that, "If morality is a system of thinking about (and maximizing) the well-being of conscious creatures like ourselves, many people's moral concerns must be immoral,"<sup>70</sup> a point belabored on nearly every page. By refusing to give a hard and fast definition of well-being, Harris forces debate away from the dispute over how to define it, and down other avenues. By brokering in science, he hopes for that sort of adjustment to our fellow humans that will result in a "universal morality." Dennett seems to have a similar project in mind when, in "Some More Questions About Science,"<sup>71</sup> he argues for the acceptance of terms of discussion favorable to the thesis of his book. Of the six books covered in these essays, *Breaking the Spell* has the least to say about morality. Yet it remains possible to see the influence on Harris' quasi-pragmatism of the ethical philosophies in Dennett's orbit, so to speak. There is, of course, direct acknowledgment of the help tendered by Dennett in reviewing early drafts of *The Moral Landscape*,<sup>72</sup> but it also seems to me that when Harris cursorily dismisses his critics as not having taken the subject of morality seriously,<sup>73</sup> he is only amping up the rhetoric in Dennett's arguments to the effect that some beliefs "really cannot be given any *consideration* in the ongoing investigation" over religion and morality.<sup>74</sup>

Ironically, the association with pragmatist philosophy proves fatal to Harris' design, which is meant to oppose not only religious accounts of morality, but also the moral relativism that the Horsemen have unanimously decried. The pragmatist position described by a philosopher like Richard Rorty is relativistic to the core, rejecting the supposition "that moral

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<sup>69</sup> "Ethics Without Principles," published in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, Richard Rorty (Penguin:1999), 72

<sup>70</sup> *TML*, 87

<sup>71</sup> *BtS*, Appendix B, 359-378

<sup>72</sup> See the Acknowledgements, *TML* 194

<sup>73</sup> Cf. e.g. *TML*, 204 fn. 22; and so on.

<sup>74</sup> *BtS*, 359



progress is at least in part a matter of increasing moral knowledge, knowledge about something independent of our social practices: something like the will of God or the nature of humanity.<sup>75</sup> This erodes Harris' goal of rooting moral knowledge in scientific inquiry, since it ultimately suggests we need not derive *ought* from some empirical fact at all. No doubt the pragmatist rejection of a correspondence theory of truth would horrify Harris. And yet, by casting values in the role of facts in pursuance of well-being, Harris has presented a science of morality that functions along precisely those lines.

It is of a similar program that Rorty wrote, "This picture of moral progress makes us resist Kant's suggestion that morality is a matter of reason, and makes us sympathetic to Hume's suggestion that it is a matter of sentiment."<sup>76</sup> Harris' extensive effort to demonstrate "that a clear boundary between facts and values simply does not exist,"<sup>77</sup> ultimately works against his moral realism, since his emphasis on establishing that they "arise from similar processes at the level of the brain" proves only the subjectivity of fact, not the facticity of value. So much the worse for objective facts. But the real consequence, to which he is apparently blind, is that dissolving that boundary, not only in neurological practice but also in ethical principle, necessarily relocates the foundation of his moral theory in Rorty's "matter of sentiment."



In order to see more clearly the pragmatic vein in *The Moral Landscape*, consider the three projects Harris places under the purview of a scientific inquiry into morality:

1. We can explain why people tend to follow certain patterns of thought and behavior (many of them demonstrably silly and harmful) in the name of "morality."
2. We can think more clearly about the nature of moral truth and determine which patterns of thought and behavior we *should* follow in the name of "morality."

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<sup>75</sup> "Ethics Without Principles," 84

<sup>76</sup> "Ethics Without Principles," 87

<sup>77</sup> *TML*, 11

3. We can convince people who are committed to silly and harmful patterns of thought and behavior in the name of “morality” to break these commitments and to live better lives.<sup>78</sup>

According to Harris, science has so far restricted itself to the first project. His aim is to demonstrate that the second and third rightly belong to the province of science, but the order of priority he envisions says a great deal about his goals. On the following page, he writes,

I happen to believe that the third project – changing people’s ethical commitments – is the most important task facing humanity in the twenty-first century. Nearly every other important goal – from combating climate change, to fighting terrorism, to curing cancer, to saving the whales – falls within its purview. Of course, moral persuasion is a difficult business, but it strikes me as especially difficult if we haven’t figured out in what sense moral truths exist. Hence, my main focus is on project 2.

This implies not that others should be persuaded because we already have a clear sense of where their moral systems have gone wrong, but that the project of determining how their moral systems is justified on *a priori* grounds by the goals Harris (or the Western scientific community) has decided upon in advance. For someone apparently committed to moral realism, he could hardly have put those priorities in more disarray.

In hope of explaining so much confusion, we may observe that Harris has taken a buffet approach to the field of ethics. The work of 3,000 years of philosophy stands arrayed before him, and he ladles onto his moral scheme only the elements that appeal to his taste. This morsel he takes in order to maintain moral realism; that, in order to dispense with the *if-ought* problem. When Kant is useful for his purposes, Kant is correct; when Kant stands opposed, he may be dismissed out of hand. It does not seem to occur to him that each fact of ethical philosophy entails consequences that may entangle his scheme in self-contradiction. Thus, when he needs it to overcome the burdens proposed by Hume and Moore, he talks of well-being as though it were synonymous with good; when he needs it to serve as a pretext for denying moral authority to religion, he talks of it in strictly pragmatic terms. He comes closest to reconciling those two incompatible uses when he borrows most from Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, though he begs off the

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<sup>78</sup> TML, 49

influence, claiming “not to pay any attention to Aristotle.”<sup>79</sup> The reason, perhaps, is that the *Nicomachean Ethics* ultimately spells out an aretaic ethics (that is, one premised on the cultivation of personal virtue) rather than a consequentialist one. Harris is explicit in stating that he does not wish to be “beholden to the quirks of the great man’s philosophy,” and yet does not stop short of adopting Aristotle’s aretaic proposal to judge the ethical value of the whole pattern of a person’s life. Harris considers it “indisputable that most of what we do with our lives is predicated on there being nothing more important, at least for ourselves and those closest to us, than the difference between the Bad Life and the Good Life.”<sup>80</sup> Those two poles he illustrates by presenting two vignettes: the Bad Life being represented by the victim of third-world conflict; the Good Life, by the beneficiary of first-world affluence. True to form, Harris is hyperbolic in his portrayal of the worse alternative, and the “young widow” of his Bad Life is little more than Aristotle’s exemplar, Priam, stripped of all complexity and updated to modern terms. Here, the confusion is most palpable: good, as Harris defined it, is whatever stands in support of well-being; by focusing on well-being, we hope to attain the Good Life. The circularity demonstrates the extent to which Harris has failed to evade the burdens of the discipline.

These considerations do not, unfortunately, exhaust the confusion that prevails in *The Moral Landscape*. For example: in light of Harris’ insistence that, “Where our intentions come from [...] and what determines their character in every instance, remains perfectly mysterious in subjective terms,” what could it mean to say “I intend.” His discussion of determinism (meant to dispel a straw man version of the argument for free will) calls into question my ownership of the intention. Might it not follow that I belong to the intention, rather than vice versa? If, as the otherwise needless section on “The Illusion of Free Will”<sup>81</sup> seems to suggest, *I intend* means only that I *feel* as though the intention was mine, then how can it mean anything at all to insist, as he does, that, “The freedom to do what one intends, and not do otherwise, is no less valuable than it ever was”?

Here, as elsewhere, Harris seems to have overlooked the significance of such considerations for his project, supposing that these questions apply primarily to “the religious notion of ‘sin’ and our enduring commitment to retributive justice.” He writes, “Any scientific developments that threatened our notion of free will would seem to put the ethics of punishing people for their bad behavior in question.” But having failed to reconnect choice to

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<sup>79</sup> *TML*, 195 fn. 9

<sup>80</sup> *TML*, 16

<sup>81</sup> *TML*, 102-106

intention, he jeopardizes the entire status of ethical philosophy. If we are not credibly capable of choosing our behavior, then prescription is moot, and morality nothing more than a guise for behaviorism. Harris' unsubstantiated insistence that, "Of course, there is a distinction between voluntary and involuntary actions," only serves to emphasize the difficulties he has opened and failed to close. His solution to those difficulties is to argue that, "Judgements of responsibility [...] depend upon the overall complexion of one's mind, not on the metaphysics of mental cause and effect."<sup>82</sup> In the case of a person who commits some radical immorality, "we need not have any illusions about a casual [sic] agent living within the human mind to condemn such a mind as unethical, negligent, or even evil, and therefore liable to occasion further harm."<sup>83</sup> That amounts to no longer regarding persons as moral agents, but rather as cognitive programs, judged according to how they have been inscribed rather than what they do.<sup>84</sup>

Nor is it clear that the sort of science of morality Harris proposes could avoid such a pass. In order to isolate moral truth within the purview of neuroscience, the bulk of the chapter "Good and Evil" shifts away from the purely rational basis for morality suggested by the preceding chapter, in favor of "intuitions" and emotional responses. Moral realism, in this context, means constraining moral categories to a substrate of cognitive activities, and in particular, those that will be susceptible of neurological classification. "Evil" thus becomes a particular arrangement (or, rather, disarrangement) of the brain, one that can be "cured" by seeing to it "that every relevant change in the human brain can be made cheaply, painlessly, and safely." Thus, "The cure for psychopathy can be put directly into the food supply like vitamin D. Evil is now nothing more than a nutritional deficiency."<sup>85</sup> Yet, from another perspective,<sup>86</sup> a biological cure for evil would be synonymous with a cure for moral choice. An actual cure for psychopathy would not eliminate the person's desire to prosper through immoral behavior, but rather allow her to choose good in spite of that desire. But once subordinated to the imperatives of a discipline like neuroscience, ethics will necessarily tend to construe morality in terms of normative states, and immorality in terms of abnormal pathologies. The logic of a medical science will dictate that those abnormal states require

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<sup>82</sup> *TML*, 107

<sup>83</sup> *TML*, 108

<sup>84</sup> For examples of how that might play out, see "The Diagnostic of Belief."

<sup>85</sup> *TML*, 109

<sup>86</sup> Like that expressed in *A Clockwork Orange*, both the book by Anthony Burgess (1962) and the film by Stanley Kubrick (1971).

correction, even if such correction comes at the expense of the sort of agency that gives moral choice its character.

Unsurprisingly, Harris endorses the pathology of evil as “progress away from religious metaphysics.”<sup>87</sup> That diagnosis would prove untenably ironic should the ultimate source of his own conviction concerning the moral centrality of well-being prove to arise not from a consideration of the implications of biology, but rather from “spirituality” or “mysticism.” Harris uses those words begrudgingly, claiming that neither “captures the reasonableness and profundity of the possibility that we must now consider: that there is a form of well-being that supersedes all others, indeed, that transcends the vagaries of experience itself.”<sup>88</sup> Specifically he has in mind “Buddhism (e.g., the Dzogchen teachings of the Vajrayana) and Hinduism (e.g., the teachings of Advaita Vedanta), as well as many years spent practicing various techniques of meditation.”<sup>89</sup> Those traditions, he asserts, “offer the most complete methodology we have for discovering the intrinsic freedom of consciousness, unencumbered by any dogma.” The central methodology cited by Harris is that of meditation, by which he means “any means whereby our sense of ‘self’ – of subject/object dualism in perception and cognition – can be made to vanish, while consciousness remains vividly aware of the continuum of existence.”<sup>90</sup> By some such technique, a person may discover that “the failure to recognize thoughts *as thoughts*, moment after moment, is what gives each of us the feeling that we call ‘I,’ and this is the string upon which all our states of suffering and dissatisfaction are strung.” Subject/object duality is made to disappear – or, at least, cognizance of it – “as will the fundamental difference between conventional states of happiness and suffering.”

Whether or not any of this proves true is not the issue; it would certainly go beyond the scope of this essay to embark on a critique of the traditions of Buddhism or Hinduism. The point is simply that Harris seems to have derived the defining principle of his science of morality from a decidedly spiritual source. “Once the selflessness of consciousness has been glimpsed,” he tells us, “spiritual life can be viewed as a matter of freeing one’s attention more and more so that this recognition can become stabilized. This is where the connection between spirituality and ethics

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<sup>87</sup> *TML*, 110

<sup>88</sup> *TEoF*, 205

<sup>89</sup> *TEoF*, 293-296 fn. 12; the bulk of this footnote, one of the longest in the book, is given over to explaining why, in Harris’ opinion, no other spiritual or mystical tradition can hope to claim Buddhism’s “preeminence as a system of spiritual instruction.”

<sup>90</sup> *TEoF*, 217-220

becomes inescapable.” He accompanies all of this, as he is prone to do, with the repeated assurance that it “is an empirical claim, not a matter of philosophical speculation,” but if so then he is surely using a sense of empirical that is largely alien to scientific method. “Scientists,” he insists, “are making their first attempts to test claims of this sort, but every experienced meditator has tested them already.” That seems very much to have been the order of priority for Harris, and we may well doubt that science is capable of drawing from such experiences the same conclusions that someone trained in Buddhist meditation would – unless, like Harris, you construe science “broadly” as pertaining to the entire spectrum of facts, and regard facts as indistinguishable from values.

Here we arrive at an unresolved issue that plagues the Horsemen at their most rationalistic: how may something like the traditional values be brokered into a scheme premised on materialism?<sup>91</sup> “A good scientific materialist,” writes Dennett, “can be just as concerned about whether there is plenty of justice, love, joy, beauty, political freedom, and, yes, even religious freedom as about whether there is plenty of food and clothing, for instance, since *all* of these are material benefits, and some are more important than others.”<sup>92</sup> No doubt a scientific materialist can be concerned about such things; nor need we have any doubt that Dennett himself concerns himself over such things. But it is doubtful whether or not, in doing so, he is behaving scientifically or materialistically. From the perspective of philosophical materialism, love and beauty, for example, prove notoriously elusive substances, and the scientific materialist is often reduced to dealing not with love or beauty, but with near-equivalents in perception. Thus the sociologist and psychologist deal not with the amount of love in a given community, since love itself ends up altogether evading objective measurement, but rather with the impression (which can be mistaken) of being loved, or with expressions (which can be faked) of affection. Here Dennett seems to have fallen into a charge he previously sought to evade, or at least qualify: that of reductionism. There are, on his account, good reductionisms and bad, or “greedy,” reductionisms. The emphasis on “*all*” signals the greedy reductionism in Dennett’s appropriation of “justice, love, joy, beauty, political freedom, and, yes, even religious freedom.” Indeed, it would be difficult to imagine a greedier one.

In that regard, the possibility that Harris has derived the central premise of his moral landscape from religion presents only the most acute form of the crisis. The question we face, then, is that of whether he can be relied

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<sup>91</sup> See “The Heirs of *La Coterie Holbachique*” for the connection French materialism.

<sup>92</sup> *BtS*, 305

upon to distinguish between the moral insights he has drawn from spiritual practice, and his claims for a purely objective, scientific moral landscape. I have little doubt of his sincerity. If he tells us that he has experienced “consciousness prior to the subject/object dichotomy,” then certainly he must have had some such experience. Even the claim that “it is, at least in principle, an experience that is available to anyone” seems plausible enough. But surely not everyone would have the experience and conclude from it that consciousness is, as he claims, “prior to the subject/object dichotomy.” That interpretation, as well as the ethical premises he draws from it, are very likely an effect of the context in which he was introduced to the spiritual practice, predicated on the claim that “consciousness inherently transcends its contents” and that the practitioner can “discover that it already enjoys the well-being that the self would otherwise seek.”<sup>93</sup> His meditative practices are, in that regard, indistinguishable from most forms of religious ritual, and for that reason we may even be tempted to regard them as innately religious in character.<sup>94</sup> Hereto, this essay has concentrated on philosophical reasons for insisting on better substantiation than Harris has yet given for the role he assigns to “well-being,” but the possibility that it has, in fact, been furnished by religious practice makes it all the more crucial that he ground the notion in logical argument, rather than provoke it in subjective experience, if it is to be accepted as scientific. What he has provided instead is a series of evasions and rationalizations for its inclusion.

In the face of criticisms that suggest these difficulties, Harris has been characteristically dismissive. In response to a unnamed critic asking “*Why* should human well-being matter to us?” he responds, “Well, why should logical coherence matter to us? Why should historical veracity matter to us? Why should experimental evidence matter to us? These are profound and profoundly stupid questions.”<sup>95</sup> He seems to have interpreted his critic as denying that we do, in practice, value human well-being, when the point may have been to draw attention to the way in which well-being surreptitiously introduces the traditional value of good, even while denying the logical burdens that attend it. The bid to justify a preference for well-being he likens to an attempt to justify transitivity in logic. “A skeptic,” he argues, “could say that this is nothing more than an assumption that we’ve

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<sup>93</sup> *TEoF*, 221

<sup>94</sup> See “The Taxonomy of Religion” for discussion of the significance of ritual to the identification of religion.

<sup>95</sup> “Moral Confusion in the Name of Science,” *The Huffington Post*, March 29, 2010: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/sam-harris/moral-confusion-in-the-na\\_b\\_517710.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/sam-harris/moral-confusion-in-the-na_b_517710.html).

built into the definition of ‘equality.’ Others will be free to define ‘equality’ differently. Yes, they will. And we will be free to call them ‘imbeciles.’” His resort to ridicule strikes me as a tacit declaration of the failure of ethical philosophy, as though to say that, in the face of the apparent insolubility of dilemmas like Hume’s *is-ought* problem, we have no recourse but to settle for programs of casuistry, and to build them on a moral framework that one questions only at the risk of being ostracized. To make that suggestion crystal clear: *The Moral Landscape* does not, after all, present an ethical theory, but rather an elaborate rationalization for a scientistic casuistry with unexamined foundations.



In the end, I am not particularly concerned, as apparently some of Harris’ detractors have been, “that an emphasis on human ‘well-being’ would lead us to do terrible things like reinstate slavery, harvest the organs of the poor, periodically nuke the developing world, of nurture our children on a continuous drip of heroin.”<sup>96</sup> Given his own resort to ridicule, apocalyptic forecasts and brusque dismissals of criticism, Harris risks calling kettle black when he suggests that such critics are “not thinking about these issues seriously.” At any rate, we need not rely on intimidating scenarios of that sort. Certainly, there have been episodes in human history when social theory and lapses in moral rigor have contrived to plunge us into atrocity, and we are not guaranteed to avoid such pitfalls in the future. But while not every person will have to endure a genocide or enslavement, every person faces daily moral dilemmas. The moral intuitions and theories that inform mundane decisions therefore have an impact that is, for most people, more immediate than those envisioned in those hyperbolic scenarios. How we scale that ethical theory to encompass decisions measured in megadeaths remains a matter of grave concern, but with ethical premises like those suggested by the Four Horsemen, we may begin by assessing their impact on the local level.

Tightly knit with that concern over the scale of moral theory we encounter a similar concern over its scope. Harris’ interest in the use of moral theory is decidedly global. Science, he tells us, “can, in principle, help us understand what we *should* do and *should* want – and, therefore, what *other people* should do and want in order to live the best lives possible.”<sup>97</sup> We might go so far as to say that science’s appeal as a tool of moral inquiry lies in how it allows the moralist to dictate the obligations of

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<sup>96</sup> *TML*, 199 fn. 11

<sup>97</sup> *TML*, 28



others. Part of Harris' vision for the moral landscape is its capacity to dissolve ethical disagreement by fiat. The potential for mutual self-destruction inherent in modern weaponry provides him with the pretense for making an imperative of that capacity – sense consensus is necessary to avert our annihilation, forging a moral consensus becomes, itself, a moral obligation.

What that means in practical terms he leaves mostly to the imagination, perhaps because he is at least dimly aware that the most logical interpretations tend toward conclusions that conflict with the liberal ground he has sought to inhabit. After all, how could the refusal to “respect and tolerate vast differences” serve any practical purpose against the threat of “destructive technology,” unless that refusal implied some form of action devised to narrow or negate those distances? That seems to be the sort of action he has in mind when he writes that it is ethical to “drop a bomb on Osama bin Laden or Ayman Al Zawahiri” not for anything that either man has done, but because “they are likely to get a lot of innocent people killed because of what they and their followers believe about jihad, martyrdom, the ascendancy of Islam, etc.”<sup>98</sup> Here we see the moral element directed towards the construction of a political agenda, and the insistence that such differences should be neither respected nor tolerated suggests an authoritarian impulse. Those considerations tell us something about how he envisions the future of ethical inquiry.

The domain of moral and ethical philosophy may be construed in two ways. In the first, the pivot of any given ethical philosophy will be the ethical agent who invokes it. She will have gone to ethical philosophy in order to gain clarity about her own decision-making process, and in that regard, ethics proves to be an explicitly personal, subjective and voluntary discipline. In either case, ethics will serve to change the way she relates to some facet of the world around her, but in this case it does so by giving her the tools to draw her own conclusions and make her own choices.

In the second interpretation, the domain of moral and ethical thought is necessarily social, and its subject extends beyond the person who subscribes to any particular ethical theory. On that view, she will have gone to ethical philosophy not only to understand her own obligations, but (more to the point) to circumscribe the obligations of others; to understand not only what she ought to expect of them, but also to recognize when they have failed. We are, then, talking about a discursive process whereby the ethical theory of specialists is dictated to the general population as a lay morality. When we construe it thus, morality becomes social, rather than personal; it is

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<sup>98</sup> “Response to Controversy”; see “The Diagnostics of Belief” for a fuller consideration.

taken as objective, rather than subjective; and its appeal is that it overrides the volition of the ethical agent in order to conscript her to a program decided upon by some external authority. In as much as the ethical theory was constructed with that dissemination in mind, we are talking about an ethics that proves more political than genuinely philosophical, in that it addresses itself to the distribution of power as much as to the structure of inquiry. In such cases it is prudent to remain skeptical, since a political ethics may well be canted to the advantage of the ethical elite, and at the expense of the parties conscripted to its moral incarnation.

It is in the context of those two views of ethical theory that we can make sense of the rhetorical question Harris asks: “how have we convinced ourselves that on the subject of morality, all views must count equally?” To the extent that ethics represents a method of inquiry bearing on each person’s decision-making process, the question is nonsense. It is like asking what point value to assign to the king in a game of chess: as far as morality goes, the whole of the game is involved in the individual’s personal belief. The question only makes sense with regards to a political ethics, one that conscripts each person to a standard for which they had no responsibility. As Harris puts it, “everyone also has an intuitive ‘morality,’ but much intuitive morality is clearly wrong (with respect to the goal of maximizing personal and collective well-being). And only genuine moral experts would have a deep understanding of the causes and conditions of human and animal well-being.”<sup>99</sup> At one point, in fact, Harris defines “the proper goal of morality” in strictly socio-political terms as that of “living a fulfilling life with others.”<sup>100</sup> Significantly, the *Nicomachean Ethics* – from which that notion of the Good Life was derived – classifies ethics as a branch of politics. In elaborating his ethical theory, Aristotle hoped to contribute to the proper ordering of the state.

It is here that concerns arise over the social implications of Harris’ moral landscape. In his reference to “*other people*” and his rejection of toleration and respect, Harris marks his ethical theory with the stamp of politics.<sup>101</sup> As such, he has laid the foundation for the same sort of ethical theory invoked by religious conservatives when they abjure others on the basis of their sexual behavior, or when they attempt to pass laws that enforce morality. That proves particularly ironic given how the discussion in the fifth chapter of *The End of Faith* turns on the injustice of legislating morality, specifically “drug use, prostitution, sodomy, and the viewing of obscene

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<sup>99</sup> *TML*, 36

<sup>100</sup> *TML*, 205 fn. 24

<sup>101</sup> For that reason alone, the topics covered here, of necessity, bleed over into those discussed in another essay, “The Irreligious Right” – which see.

materials,” behaviors that “have been categorized as ‘victimless crimes.’”<sup>102</sup> On Harris’ account, to provide a moral argument against a particular behavior it need only be demonstrated that the behavior adversely affects the objective well-being of the person who engages in it. The principle that morality can tell us, “perforce, what *other people* should do and want in order to live the best lives” can further be strengthened by the argument that “belief is a lever that, once pulled, moves almost everything else in a person’s life.”<sup>103</sup>

In fact, a fifth of *The Moral Landscape* is given over to an account of belief that further cedes ethical agency to the sphere of Harris’ favored “moral elite,” the neuroscientist. The establishment of that external authority implies a situation in which the laity simply surrenders the lion’s share of personal responsibility. In calling for us to acknowledge the “moral expertise” of scientists in his own field, Harris seems to suggest that we should think of ethics as something that the rest of us passively accept in the form of morality. An illustration of that process is described by Hannah Arendt in the essay “Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship.”<sup>104</sup> There she talks of the ordinary German citizen’s participation in the war and Holocaust as the subscription to a morality devised and disseminated by the National Socialists, and puts forward the thesis that those who refused to participate, even when they could not articulate their reasons for that refusal, did so because they had retained their sense of personal moral responsibility. On the basis of what he has said and written, I see no way of evading the conclusion that Harris’ interest rests in replacing individual ethical choice with a form of unanswerable moral authority.

It will be noted that in the course of criticizing these polemical accounts of ethical thought, I have mostly stopped short of offering an alternative ethical theory. That is, in no small part, to emphasize the value of ethical independence. Earlier I suggested that there are two ways to approach ethics, one philosophical and the other political. The first treats ethics as a discipline that each person must practice according to the best of their understanding and ability; the second, as a tool for fashioning creeds to which others may (or must) be conscripted. Harris is correct when he writes that, “There are very practical concerns that follow from the glib idea that anyone is free to value anything,” but mistaken in declaring the most consequential to be that “it is precisely what allows highly educated, secular, and otherwise well-intentioned people to pause thoughtfully, and

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<sup>102</sup> *TEoF*, 158

<sup>103</sup> *TEoF*, 12; see “The Diagnostics of Belief” for elaboration on that theme.

<sup>104</sup> Originally given as a lecture in 1964; reprinted in the volume *Responsibility and Judgment* (Schocken:2003)

often interminably, before condemning practices like compulsory veiling, genital excision, bride-burning, forced marriage, and the other cheerful products of alternative 'morality' found elsewhere in the world."<sup>105</sup> In truth, that conclusion can only arise from treating ethics as though the purpose was to allow such highly education, well-intentioned people to make decisions on behalf of others.

That there are, as he claims, "women and girls getting their faces burned off with acid at this moment for daring to learn to read, or for not consenting to marry men they have never met, or even for the crime of getting raped" is not a consequence of supposing that people must bear the final responsibility for their own moral and ethical dispositions. Quite the opposite, in fact: such injustices are the result of a political approach to ethics, one which says, along with Harris, that the good (or God, or human well-being) is best served when some authority acts to override moral and ethical difference.

Yet a great deal of risk adheres to the position that people must rely on their own reason and intuition to make decisions of moral consequence. The greatest of these is that they will make the wrong decision, whatever that may prove to be. But so long as we are consistent, what I have described as the genuinely philosophical approach to ethics can never contribute to a situation where violence or legislation are respected as tools of ensuring moral conformity.

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<sup>105</sup> *TML*, 42

## THE HEIRS OF LA COTERIE HOLBACHIQUE

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IN THE 18<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY, a nobleman named Paul-Henri Thiry hosted a twice weekly salon frequented by some of the most noted intellectuals of the day. Diderot was counted among the attendees, as was Condorcet, Helvétius, Hume, and Gibbon. It was Rousseau, a sometimes attendee, who declared the loose group *la coterie holbachique*. Though the salon met at his home in Paris, Thiry – better known to contemporary readers as Baron d’Holbach – was born Paul Heinrich Dietrich of Germany, and had attended the University of Leiden not long before forming his Parisian salon. As such, d’Holbach stood astride the two major cultural and philosophical streams of his day, the German Enlightenment on the one hand, and French Materialism on the other. Among the topics regularly discussed at his salon were religion and Rationalism, and it hardly exaggerates the matter to say that the main lines of modern Western secularism all passed through his home at one time or another during its thirty year span. The Baron himself wrote a number of treatises hostile to religion, starting with *Christianity Unveiled* and culminating with *Good Sense*, an abridgment of his magnum opus *The System of Nature*, that was (and for our purposes, remains) the model for subsequent atheist polemic. D’Holbach died in early 1789, only months before the onset of the French Revolution.

That summary history represents the outlay of facts that make Baron d’Holbach suitable as a symbol for all that has descended from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the Four Horsemen and the modern school of thought they represent. Though the name has stuck, few critics can bear to write the words “New Atheist” without, at one point or another, qualifying that there is nothing particularly new about the New Atheism. Indeed, both in substance and style, *Good Sense* reads like a contemporary of *The End of Faith* and *God Is Not Great*. The atheistic critique pressed by the Four

Horsemen bears so many marked similarities to the criticism of d'Holbach's era, that it may be tempting to regard them as a mere update of that mostly bygone creed. Yet there remains sufficient reason to consider their attack on persistent religious culture something new, on grounds that it takes work to resuscitate a body from which the life is mostly gone. Most of the recapitulation and analysis in the essays that accompany this one have been concerned with intellectual work that has gone into retrofitting an 18<sup>th</sup> century critique for a 21<sup>st</sup> century context.<sup>1</sup>

The *philosophes* of the 18<sup>th</sup> century had inherited from 17<sup>th</sup> century Cartesianism two basic axioms: the supremacy of reason and the invariability of the laws of nature. Decartes had forwarded those principles as a rebuttal against the radical skepticism of philosophers of the previous generation, such as Michel de Montaigne, and they were rapidly taken up into what was called the dispute of the Ancients and the Moderns. The Ancients championed a contemporary version of the classical notion that the world suffered from a continual decline; each generation represented a progressive falling away from the greatness of previous generations. The Moderns countered by arguing, on the basis of the Cartesian axioms, that human civilization was, in fact, progressive, and that future generations could be counted on to build upon the achievements of those that went before. Human nature was considered constant, such that successive generations would not lack for ability, and the supremacy of reason would allow for the incremental growth of knowledge and technique. The dispute was ultimately settled in favor of the Moderns, and the vision of progressive human civilization that they favored took on something like its doctrinal form in the opening decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> century under the stewardship of intellectuals like Fontenelle and Castel, abbé de Saint-Pierre.

The doctrine of Progress, as we have come to know it, provided the context for the radical religious critiques put forward by *la coterie holbachique*. The basic creed allowed the argument that human civilization had progressed beyond the need for an anachronistic superstition like religion. D'Holbach himself expressed it thus:

The origin of religious opinions is generally dated from the time, when savage nations were yet in infancy. It was to gross, ignorant, and stupid people, that the founders of religion have in all ages

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<sup>1</sup> Much of what follows is derived from *The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry Into Its Origin and Growth*, J. B. Bury (MacMillan: 1920); *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*, Michael J. Buckley (Yale:1990); and *French Liberal Thought in the Eighteenth Century: A Study of Political Ideas from Bayle to Condorcet*, Kingsley Martin (Ernest Benn Ltd:1929).

addressed themselves, when they wished to give them their Gods, their mode of worship, their mythology, their marvelous and frightful fables. These chimeras, adopted without examination by parents, are transmitted, with more or less alteration, to their children, who seldom reason any more than their parents.<sup>2</sup>

The analogy that compares historical eras to the phases of human growth – infancy, adolescence, adulthood, and (in some versions) senility – was indicative of some brands of the Progressive doctrine, and Dawkins, Hitchens and Harris may all be observed to espouse some version of it.

Indeed, the opposition put forward by the French Materialist school was bound up with the notion of the inevitable Progress of civilization under the guiding hand of Reason. In its approach to the French Revolution, the main lines of Rationalism were represented by two groups. On the one hand were the contributors to Denis Diderot's *Encyclopédie*. Propagandistic, anti-clerical, anti-authoritarian, they taught the perfectibility of humanity and the unity of scientific knowledge. On the other hand were those historian J. M. Bury calls "the Economists," who focused on the study of society, and particularly the problems of production and distribution. They tended to be less idealistic than their Encyclopedist brethren, providing the foundation for English utilitarianism and serving as the branching point for both capitalism and socialism in something like their modern forms. It would perhaps be illuminating, in a larger study than this, to situate many of the differences of approach and opinion that distinguish the Four Horsemen from one another in terms of which influence, Encyclopedist or Economist, predominates in each.

At times, each of the Four Horsemen makes explicit reference to those Materialist forbearers. Hitchens, for his part, traces the tradition further back, through the Renaissance, back to the "Resistance of the Rational"<sup>3</sup> he sees in 7<sup>th</sup> century Athens, particularly via the dialectical method of Socrates. It is likely that Hitchens has overestimated the commitment Socrates and his (not always faithful) transmitter Plato had to pure reason; both had an equal commitment to what the classical scholar E. R. Dodds calls "the Irrational," of which Socrates' "good *daemon*" was only the most overt example.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, Hitchens commutes this resistance into "The Need for a New Enlightenment,"<sup>5</sup> one in which we "transcend our

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<sup>2</sup> *Good Sense*, §14

<sup>3</sup> *GING*, Chapter Eighteen

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *The Greeks and the Irrational*, E. R. Dodds (1968)

<sup>5</sup> *GING*, Chapter Nineteen

prehistory, and escape the gnarled hands which reach out to drag us back to the catacombs and the reeking alters and the guilty pleasures of subjection and abjection.”<sup>6</sup>

If, until this century, there have been few advocates of Enlightenment or Rationalism as stringent as d’Holbach, it may be because his inheritors benefit from a hindsight that was barred to him and many of his generation. D’Holbach did not live to see the history made by the philosophy he and his fellow *philosophes* had written. As with the victims depicted in Kafka’s “The Penal Colony,” the translation of high ideals into a historical circumstance is too often accomplished by inscribing change directly and horrifically onto the bodies of real people. Writing from their end of history, the *philosophes* may have believed that Rationalism would, as a consequence of its very nature, avoid the faults of the absolutisms they derided. If so, the grotesque turns of the French Revolution demonstrated to their successors how swiftly Rationalism could be distorted into an absolutism in its own right.

The pre-Modern period may be said to end with the Revolution, ushering in democratic and philosophical reforms that have since defined our conception of civilization as such. Perhaps because it is so central to the history of our particular brand of civilization, we often fail to recognize what a bloody affair it was. The fight against the *ancien regime* was only one aspect of the struggle, and the modern graduate who returns to the subject years after having learned it in school may be most startled to realize how much of the struggle took place within the hearts and minds of the revolutionaries themselves.

There were, of course, visible battles: the July 1789 riots, the storming of the Bastille, the Great Fear. But it was what took place after the abolition of feudalism in August of the same year that showed the vicious potential in the high ideals of the Republic. Violent suppression was deemed necessary to maintain the reforms against the rebellions of anti-revolutionaries. In time, opposition to those forces became a handy pretext for police and military action against groups that were less credibly labeled anti-revolutionary. In 1791, the National Assembly passed a Draconian law forbidding emigration from France. Riots and mob violence were the usual accompaniment to the official declarations of the Assembly. Such violence was often followed by the imposition of curfew and the suppression of free speech. The attempt to govern on Rationalist principles failed repeatedly, often with catastrophic effects, and was kept alive only at the cost of continual revision. War was deemed necessary both to protect the Republic from external threats as well as to secure hope of exporting the Revolution

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<sup>6</sup> GING, 283



to France's neighbors. More to the point, the Revolution achieved its goals largely by waging nearly ceaseless war on its own citizens. When the economy all but collapsed, the *sans-culottes* rioted, giving way to famine and the Reign of Terror. Tens of thousands of citizens were executed in a matter of years, many of them without trial.

The religious were particularly vulnerable. Priceless works of art and architecture were destroyed and defaced as part of a bid to dechristianize France. A law passed in October of 1793 threatened death to clergy members who refused to swear an oath of loyalty, as well as to anyone who harbored them; more than 200 members of the clergy had been massacred over a two day period only a year prior. An atheist Cult of Reason was formed to supplant Catholicism, then was itself supplanted by a deistic Cult of the Supreme Being, and an effigy of the Goddess "Reason" was paraded through Notre Dame cathedral. The French Republic Calendar was established in part to exclude religious holy days in which the pious might still take solace. The French army eventually managed under the command of General Berthier to capture Rome and imprison Pope Pius VI, who died in captivity in 1799. The overt hostility of the Republic to formal religion ended only after the *coup d'état* of Napoleon Bonaparte, who negotiated the Concordat of 1801 with the pope's successor, Pius VII.

This represents, of course, only a summary and much simplified account, and is meant only to suggest the severity of what was inarguably a defining moment in European history. Its echoes have reverberated through the centuries that followed it. I would argue that at least one result is that the historically conscious have been cautious of the claims of Rationalism ever since. Certainly few have gone so far as reject it altogether, but the intellectual climate has long been such as to make it nearly impossible to revive the glowing, unqualified enthusiasm we see in a work like *Good Sense*. That d'Holbach knew nothing of the Revolution goes some way towards explaining his enthusiasm; he could not have anticipated the social upheavals of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, nor the abuses that inevitably arise when executive power dedicates itself to the task of "total" programs of social organization, even under the auspices of democracy. We are obliged to excuse the *philosophes*, for whom communes and utopias were a novelty still in the experimental stage. They did not yet benefit, as we may, from the analyses of a Max Horkheimer, a Reinhold Neibuhr, or an Isaiah Berlin, nor from the artistry of a Dickens, a Kafka, or an Orwell.

The New Atheists lack that excuse. They play at having reclaimed the *philosophes'* innocence of certain major themes of modernity. Having laid claim to that innocence, they are then free to suggest much that stands in direct contradiction to the experience of the intervening centuries. There sometimes arise indications that they at least recognize those themes.

Dennett hints at it when he writes that, “Good intentions are not enough. If we learned anything in the twentieth century, we learned this, for we made some colossal mistakes with the best of intentions.”<sup>7</sup> And yet, ten chapters later we find him suggesting, in rather tentative language, some very well-intentioned and equally dubious policies. His brief moment of reflection passes quickly, and much of what chases it suggests a denial of those very lessons.<sup>8</sup>



Harris expresses the return to an unqualified enthusiasm when he writes,

It has grown fashionable to assert that the true horror of the Holocaust, apart from its scale, was that it was an expression of *reason*, and that it therefore demonstrates a pathology inherent to the Western Enlightenment tradition. The truth of this assertion is held by many scholars to be self-evident – for no one can deny that technology, bureaucracy, and systematic managerial thinking made the genocidal ambitions of the Third Reich possible. The romantic thesis lurking here is that reason itself has a “shadow side” and is therefore no place to turn for the safeguarding of human happiness. This is a terrible misunderstanding of the situation, however. The Holocaust marked the culmination of German tribalism and two thousand years of Christian fulminating against the Jews. Reason had nothing to do with it.<sup>9</sup>

That passage could be taken as emblematic of the distortions to which the New Atheists are willing to subject historical interpretation in order to render the past conformable to an 18<sup>th</sup> century Rationalism. Harris has left entirely out of account both the Rationalistic ideal of nationalism, as well as the progressive view of history that informed the Holocaust, and which are most easily called to mind by simply voicing the name most associated with the event: National Socialism. What evidence Harris has of the direct role played by “two thousand years of Christian fulminating against the Jews” he does not say, and the explanation is left to work primarily by inference and association. By contrast, in the first part of her study, *The Origins of*

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<sup>7</sup> *BtS*, 15

<sup>8</sup> See “The Irreligious Right” for details.

<sup>9</sup> *TEoF*, 249 fn. 47

*Totalitarianism*, Jewish-German political philosopher Hannah Arendt traces modern anti-semitism to the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century reaction against the economic growth of a secular, Jewish bourgeoisie; that and its connection to nationalism place the anti-semitism of Nazi Germany in a direct line of descent from the traditions of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution.

It may be simply that Harris is unfamiliar with Arendt's analysis, or of the well-documented periods of cultural shift that intervened and which distinguish modern anti-semitism from its more sporadic and localized Medieval and Renaissance antecedents. In the end, the source that Harris calls in support of his interpretation proves a curious one: Ken Wilbur's *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality: The Spirit of Evolution*.<sup>10</sup> The point is not only that Harris would have done better to have chosen a more historically grounded citation. He seems to have gone out of his way to choose one that will allow him to preserve the validity of 18<sup>th</sup> century Rationalism, even against the counsel of history. This sort of discursive maneuvering proves common enough in the work of the Four Horsemen; so much so, in fact, that it can be easy to overlook precisely how complex and baroque it actually is. In order to defensibly maintain the continuing validity of the Rationalist tradition, Harris has, in effect, denied the relevance of decades, if not centuries, of study and analysis, and suggested as the most reasonable replacement a book that reinterprets nearly the whole of Western civilization along radical lines. Where I have retained the term New Atheist, it has been specifically for the purpose of calling to mind the artifice necessary to pull off that brand of radical denial.

What is new, then, is the body of supplementary rhetoric necessary to bridge the centuries and make the rhetoric of the pre-Revolutionary period seem relevant to an era well-versed in the historical results of the Revolution. Upon closer examination, in fact, much of what distinguishes the books of the Four Horsemen from their 18<sup>th</sup> century predecessors serves only to make those 18<sup>th</sup> century arguments viable once again. One way of doing so is by reinterpreting the intervening history so as to obviate the lessons of modernity. Since a more detailed account has already been given in "The Flattening of Historical Perspective," the present essay will concentrate on how such reinterpretation reconnects New Atheist rhetoric to the age of d'Holbach. The fortunes of 20<sup>th</sup> century Marxism seem to have struck the Horsemen as particularly problematic; Harris and Hitchens, in

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<sup>10</sup> Shambhala:1995; the curiousness of Harris' citation is underscored by the book's publisher – Shambhala Publications, which grew out of the counter-culture movement of the late 1960s, and specializes in Buddhism and metaphysical topics. <http://www.shambhala.com/html/about/history.cfm>; accessed September, 2010.

particular, have gone out of their way to situate that history in a context favorable to their arguments.

From the New Atheist perspective, the problem with Marxism is that it represents the 20<sup>th</sup> century's most spectacular example of the failure of a well-intentioned application of reason to the organization of society. Marxist theory was motivated by moral concern, not only for the proletariat exploited by the land owning classes, but also for humanity in general, which could be, according to theory, spared much of the suffering of inevitable social change by the careful management of revolution. All of this was undergirded by a body of argument that, at the best of times, matched anything in the political philosophy of the West for logical rigor – which says as much about its political competitors as it does for Marxism. As most know, the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century proved a veritable minefield of imploding Communist societies.

It could be said, with some justice, that very few Communist countries managed to represent anything like true Marxism, and an apologist who wanted to maintain the validity of socialism could argue that additives like Stalinism, Maoism, and (as in the case of the former Yugoslav Republic) nationalism were the fatal ingredient in each of those examples. Alternatively, our hypothetical Marxist apologist might acknowledge that early 20<sup>th</sup> century Marxism contained certain inherent flaws, while simultaneously maintaining the essential soundness of its premises; inasmuch as politics may be reckoned a science, the experiments of the last 100 years could plausibly enable future socialists to correct those flaws.

The more damning explanation is that the core of Marxism is rotten, that it is based on a handful of pivotal concepts that ultimately cannot stand up to rational scrutiny, and that, as such, it was doomed to failure from the outset. Something of the like is implied by the critiques put forward in *The End of Faith* and *God Is Not Great*. Both suggest that the core irrationality is a point Marxism has in common with religion. Moreover, they reinterpret Marxism as a “political religion,” complete with its own gods and ritual worship. This allows them to not only reassert the traditional *philosophe*'s dichotomy between religion and Rationalism, but to disavow any claim Rationalism might have to the atrocities and absurdities of Communist rule.

Maintaining that scheme requires the New Atheists to take none too complex a view of reason. After all, most Marxists throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century believed that they were being rational. Marxist theory grew out of the traditions of Materialism and Enlightenment, out of the French intellectual tradition that looked to material causes for explanations for the pattern of history and the German tradition that explained social movements by reference to a Hegelian spirit of the age. The path that leads from d'Holbach to Proudhon to Marx is not so indirect, as it turns out. If the entire edifice of Marxism ultimately stands on the foundation of premises

that ultimately prove irrational, that speaks as much to the limitations of human reason as to any categorical difference between religion and political science. All logical arguments stand on unexamined premises; to undergird those premises with further logical argument only pushes the gap further back, since then those arguments will be made to stand on earlier unexamined premises. Descartes' project of finding rational bedrock on which to stand the whole structure of human knowledge has yet to be satisfactorily realized. Western thought, from the skepticism of Montaigne to the present day, has so far failed to render Rationalism an absolute. The blindness of the socialist ideologue to the epistemic rootlessness of the premises of Marxist theory, then, are hardly unique; the systematic thought of all humans is kept aloft by a similar kind of blindness.

In that light, the argument from Rationalism, particularly acute in Harris,<sup>11</sup> proves akin to the Emperor's new clothes. Perhaps it is nowhere more clear that the New Atheists likewise have their logical blind spots than on the subject of morality. The most glaring example is the "moral *Zeitgeist*" proposed by Dawkins, since it depends on the same Hegelian foundation that served as the basis for Marxism. As such, Dawkins could hardly be expected to issue the same criticism of Marxism espoused by his fellow Horsemen; to do so would only highlight the logical weakness of his own moral argument.<sup>12</sup>

Given the growing popularity of New Atheist interpretations of history, it may not go without saying that there are other, potentially more compelling ways to understand the political ruptures of the last 300 years. One that is particularly worth highlighting in this context is the suggestion that political ideology has a dangerous tendency to lead to "total" solutions for any given social issue. The power exerted by ideological movements has been amplified by the spread of literacy and the development of a range of technologies (from the Gutenberg press to the internet) for disseminating information and ideas. One might even go so far as to suggest that the modern era is characterized by the victory of ideology. Again, the French Revolution is emblematic in this regard: it marks the dawn of an age in which the disagreement over what ideas should inform the structure of society grew to be at least as important as the possession of territory.



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<sup>11</sup> See "The Diagnostics of Belief".

<sup>12</sup> By contrast, Harris has been more successful at disguising the unquestioned assumptions that underly his discussion of morality; see "Landscapes and Zeitgeists".

It is a theme that runs through some of the greatest works of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, from Isaiah Berlin to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn – the ostensibly good and rational idea that, when put into practice as the guiding principle of society, turns suddenly monstrous and fatal. We see it presaged already in the utopian visions of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and afterwards realized in the dystopias of 20<sup>th</sup> century literature. Of the French writer Louis-Sébastien Mercier's *L'An 2440*,<sup>13</sup> J. M. Bury wrote:

The world of 2440, its intolerably docile and virtuous society, reflects two capital weaknesses in the speculation of the Encyclopaedist period: a failure to allow for the strength of human passions and interests, and a deficient appreciation of the meaning of liberty. Much as the reformers acclaimed and fought for toleration, they did not generally comprehend the value of the principle. They did not see that in a society organised and governed by Reason and Justice themselves, the unreserved toleration of false opinions would be the only palladium of progress; or that a doctrinaire State, composed of perfectly virtuous and deferential people, would arrest development and stifle originality, by its ungenial if mild tyranny.<sup>14</sup>

The New Atheists can be generally counted upon to disavow utopian aims, but remain notably less certain when it comes to “the unreserved toleration of false opinions.”

“The principle is unassailable,” Dennett insists, just before himself assailing it: “we others have no right to intrude on their private practices *so long as we can be sure that they are not injuring others*. But it is getting harder and harder to be sure about when this is the case.”<sup>15</sup> Harris takes the principle much further when he insists that private belief is a matter of public concern because it represents a principles of action that is all but irresistible.<sup>16</sup> Though neither acknowledges it, the positions they have outlined represent direct challenges to the principle established by John Stuart Mill's essay *On Liberty*.<sup>17</sup> Dennett's formulation, in fact, adheres closely to Mill's, “that the only purpose for which power can be rightly exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others.” Both Dennett and Harris espouse that premise,

<sup>13</sup> Paris:1771

<sup>14</sup> J.M. Bury, *The Idea of Progress*, 197-198.

<sup>15</sup> *BtS*, 13-14

<sup>16</sup> See “The Diagnostics of Belief” and “The Irreligious Right” for details.

<sup>17</sup> London:1859

typically referred to as the “harm principle.” Indeed, *On Liberty* stands at the fore of the 19<sup>th</sup> century intellectual tradition that informs Harris’ argument against so-called “victimless crimes” in the fifth chapter of *The End of Faith*; it likewise informs the principle of William James that religion is a private matter. Yet compare it to Harris contention, “that the very ideal of religious tolerance – born of the notion that every human being should be free to believe whatever he wants about God – is one of the principal forces driving us toward the abyss.”<sup>18</sup> Dennett cites James as an intellectual hero, but nevertheless departs from him at precisely the point where his work converges with that of Mill. Both Dennett and Harris have sought to turn the clock back 100 years on Mill’s philosophy. They place the principle in a rhetorical context more indicative of the age of d’Holbach. By doing so (though they likely would not see it that way) they erode the principles that have made *On Liberty* integral to contemporary thought. To suppose, as Harris does, that belief is so intimately connected to behavior as to obviate any right of conscience, is to nullify the premise of *On Liberty*.

The tension between *The End of Faith* and *On Liberty* is worth emphasizing because Mill represents one of the primary lines of the post-Revolution reappraisals by which what was best in the Age of Reason was made workable for the modern era. He was born in the final days of the Revolution, and weaned on the ethical theory of the English wing of the philosophical thought represented in France by Encyclopedists and Economists. The extent to which he broke from the Utilitarianism of Bentham and his father, James Mill, is explicable in part by his familiarity with the shortcomings of those theories when put into practice. That is to say, John Stuart partook in that growing historical consciousness that transformed the idealism of the pre-Revolutionary era into the practical wisdom of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The New Atheists ignore his counsel at their own peril, yes, but at ours, as well.

A century after Mill, the Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr argued that the guiding principle of the United States consists in its long tradition of forsaking ideological purity for a kind of historical realism. What characterized that realism, in Niebuhr’s view, was its propensity to modify policy in accordance with a faculty of conscience that is, as often as not, inscrutable.<sup>19</sup> Americans, in other words, philosophically cling to principle, and in many cases, the specific principles enshrined by the Age of Reason, but remain ever willing to depart from principle if the contingencies of the moment seem to warrant it. Behind that willingness stands a recognition of the limitations of pure Rationalism, which often fails to take cognizance of

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<sup>18</sup> *TEoF*, 15

<sup>19</sup> *The Irony of American History*, Reinhold Niebuhr (Scribner & Sons:1952)

the very facts that will determine the outcome of policy. When they mention Niebuhr, the Horsemen tend to be amiable but dismissive. Whatever they think of his theism, they would do well to emulate the seriousness with which he contemplated the lessons of history.

It would perhaps not put too fine a point on it to say that the New Atheists have embraced a kind of alternative history, and that they are therefore either compelled, or at liberty, to draw an alternative set of conclusions. The shape of that alternative history can be in part discerned from the reference materials they cite. In *The End of Faith* alone we find Voltaire and Gibbon cited as historical references. Both were authors of much eminence, but both were also doctrinaire, in line with the anti-clericalism of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and their accounts have been flavored by the points that each hoped to score against the leviathans of their day.

Two other influences echo throughout *God Is Not Great*, that of Orwell on the one hand, and of Freud's *The Future of An Illusion* on the other. It could be argued that Hitchens' interpretation of Orwell accords in the main with Niebuhr's sense of realism, adherence to strict Rationalism ever modified by the conscience of the witness to history.<sup>20</sup> But the spirit of Freud dominates in *God Is Not Great* – a retrograde spirit that dresses 18<sup>th</sup> century thought in the garb of 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century psychological theory. Thus, religion is held to labor ever under the specter of Thanatos, what Freud called the “death drive,” by which each person is supposed to seek their own annihilation. In Freudian theory, Thanatos is normally held in tension by Eros, the sexual drive representing the principle of life. Disorders arise when Thanatos oversteps its boundaries, and religion, therefore, is a disorder of the highest grade. Having anchored himself to this Freudian interpretation, it is no surprise when we find Hitchens declaring religious belief intrinsically morbid, and ranking sexual prohibitions among the worst of religion's affronts to nature. Dennett's explanation of the origins of funeral rites may be regarded as a more sophisticated version of the premise that religious belief originates with the natural human horror of death.<sup>21</sup>

The 18<sup>th</sup> century had given form to the notion of nationalism;<sup>22</sup> the French Revolution elevated it to the status of animating principle of the next several centuries of Western development. The first fruit brought to bear by those seeds in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the Great War. It was driven by a

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<sup>20</sup> See esp. *Why Orwell Matters*, Christopher Hitchens (Basic:2002).

<sup>21</sup> Cf. eg. *TEoF*, 36-38; *TGD*, 396-9; *GING*, i.a.

<sup>22</sup> The German term, from which our English notion of nationalism is derived, seems to have been coined by the Enlightenment philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder in the 1770s.



panoply of nationalisms: Serbian, German, Russian, Turk, Arab, Jewish and American; the technical successes of Rationalism made it the most relentless and bloody war fought thereto, as entire nations were converted into veritable war machines. Drastic change had come to the world, and entire schools of thought were forced to seek ways of reconciling doctrine to certain facts of human nature that now seemed unavoidable. To the generation that came of age with Paschendale and Gallipoli, the Great War served as an indictment of the modernity that their elders had fashioned out of the ideals of the Age of Reason. The first stirring of the post-modern age can be discerned in the poetry and prose of returned servicemen like Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves, and Ernst Junger.<sup>23</sup> Even Freud, who properly belonged to the previous generation, seems to have felt compelled to reassess his own work in the shadow of the war. No doubt the idea of a psychological drive working counter to the libido had germinated for some time, but it was not until two years after the war that Freud formally introduced the death drive into theory.<sup>24</sup> Some critics since then have argued that the death drive was inspired by the death of his 27-year-old daughter Sophie the same year. Freud denied the charge and it may be said in his defense that recent history had already made Germany witness to sufficient death and hardship to explain the morbid turn in his hitherto libido-centric work.

Still, Freud had lived the better part of 60 years when Serbian nationalists assassinated his country's Archduke in June of 1914, and the inertia of a life time lived in the flowering of modernity would prevent him from taking as much to heart the outlook of those who served in the trenches. The introduction of the death drive complicated Freudian theory, but it can be viewed as an essentially conservative addition. By providing a principle that could reconcile that his system with the experience of the War, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* preserved the rationalistic premises on which the entire edifice of Freudian psychoanalysis had been founded. The preservation of the old ideology allowed him to follow that book, first with *The Future of Illusion*, then with *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Taken together, those three can be seen as a tour de force against the changing tide of thought, the last major salvo of a generation committed to the ideologies that had driven the War. The thesis of the latter book shares certain strong affinities with the premises that informed much of the Revolutionary thought of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, as for example, the Federalist Papers: that humans are driven by a selfish and innate aggression, and that civilization must be instituted in

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<sup>23</sup> A particularly interesting survey of the period may be found in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell (Oxford:1975).

<sup>24</sup> *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Sigmund Freud (1920)

order to curb those tendencies. Despite their enduring popularity, both *The Future of Illusion* and *Civilization and Its Discontents* were soon to meet their greatest challenge with the rise to power of the National Socialist party in Germany. Where *Civilization and Its Discontents* suggested the fundamental struggle of the individual with society, World War II and the Cold War after it suggested the extent to which human aggression could serve the ends of society, with horrific results.

All of this is meant to suggest that Freud's later work proves attractive to Hitchens precisely because of the philosophically conservative element, for which the later author forgives it its clear shortcomings. Freudian analysis still has its proponents among modern therapists, but psychology has by and large passed into a more rigorously scientific phase, leaving Thanatos and Eros to the classical period. It remains useful for New Atheist rhetoric because it provides a pretense for ushering in a perspective that could not easily be sustained were Hitchens to adhere to a more contemporary line of inquiry. That, in order to do so, he has had to revive a theory that was out-of-date even when Freud proposed it only shows how desperate his case really is. For Freud had also bent psychological theory to the task of keeping alive a sociological and political theory that was, by then, already passing into the history of ideas.



Hitchens' use of *The Future of An Illusion* indicates a certain struggle that has persisted at least since *la coterie holbachique*. In fact, the primary line of Liberal opposition begins with the author of that phrase, Jean-Jaques Rousseau. It was Rousseau who issued the most potent criticism of the notion that civilization served primarily to curb the worst excesses of human nature, and to Rousseau we may trace much of the Rationalistic tradition of internal dissent. His spirit remains something like the whispered conscience of Liberalism. As they have done with John Stuart Mill, whose *On Liberty* shares Rousseau's wariness of civil forms, the New Atheists have mostly seen fit to leave Rousseau out of account, or to distort his influence.

On the other side of that struggle stands the long and extensive tradition of intellectual work that serves to renew the assumptions of French Rationalism for each generation, often in contradiction to the historically contingent experiences that have molded each. Where the New Atheist's have culled certain popular intellectual notions of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, they have each time, almost without fail, chosen authors whose theories served to rehabilitate for their particular decade or century the tradition of d'Holbach. Thus we find Harris championing something like the

semantic arguments of the logical positivists;<sup>25</sup> Karl Popper's philosophy of science echoes in nearly every mention of the purported conflict between religion and science;<sup>26</sup> Dennett cites J. M. Balkin's book *Cultural Software: A Theory of Ideology* in order to establish that certain transcendental ideals are "inescapable."<sup>27</sup> For Dennett, the appeal is clear: Balkin is a Yale professor specializing in Constitutional law, with a penchant for applying memetics to moral theory.

Perhaps what is most novel in the books of the Four Horsemen is the way in which they have folded modern scientific dispositions into the tradition of *la coterie holbachique*. I use the term "dispositions" advisedly, since the key concepts do not as yet appear to meet Popper's criteria of falsification, and thus cannot be regarded as theories in the sense most familiar to the Horsemen. Dawkins, for example, adopts the disposition described by the anthropic principle in order to achieve precisely the sort of denial of theology characteristic of the Age of Reason. Memetic explanation bears the marks of an even closer association with that tradition, as it has, from the very beginning, been associated with the attempt to explain the persistence of theology while at the same time denying its validity.<sup>28</sup> When Dawkins and Dennett invoke the proponents of meme theory, they are, whether consciously or not, favoring them for their revival of Rationalist accounts of religion.

In outlining this early history of religion, Dennett draws heavily on the arguments presented by Pascal Boyer in his book *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought*.<sup>29</sup> It may go some way towards explaining the appeal Boyer's account has for Dennett to note that Boyer's own explanatory method draws on themes that Dennett has, himself, pursued over the course of his career. Indeed, Boyer builds explicitly on several concepts previously developed by Dennett, so the suggestion that *Religion Explained* stands at the vanguard of "*the best current version of*

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<sup>25</sup> See "The Diagnostics of Belief."

<sup>26</sup> See "Covert Theology"; the most succinct indication that Popper and Freud belong to the same philosophically conservative tradition may be Popper's variation on the title and theme of *Civilization and Its Discontents*, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*.

<sup>27</sup> BtS, Appendix B: "Some More Questions About Science," 374-378. In particular, the passage quoted by Dennett on 377 functions as a rebuke against moral relativism; see "Landscapes and Zeitgeists."

<sup>28</sup> The term was coined by Dawkins in the last chapter of Dawkins' *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford:1976).

<sup>29</sup> Basic:2001

the story science can tell” is not without an element of self-aggrandizement.<sup>30</sup>

Perhaps most telling from the historical point of view is the end to which Boyer puts the functionalist explanations of evolutionary biology, itself a recurring theme in the work of both Dennett (as the advocate *par excellence* of “Universal Darwinism”) and Dawkins. For sound reasons, Boyer’s own field of expertise, anthropology, had dispensed with something like that brand of explanation nearly 50 years prior. In order to rehabilitate it for the purpose of exploring the origins of religion, Boyer builds a questionable analogy to biological explanations for the evolution of newly discovered organs of behavior.<sup>31</sup> Having nominally brokered functionalism back into anthropological inquiry, he goes on to rehabilitate other previously discarded explanations, albeit in slightly modified form. In Dennett’s estimate, the central thesis put forward by anthropologists like Boyer “is that in order to explain the hold that various religious ideas and practices have on people, we need to understand the evolution of the human mind.”<sup>32</sup> The most salient point to understand, on this account, is how human minds get the world wrong.<sup>33</sup> From there, it is possible to devise explanations for religion by imagining the conditions that would lead a primitive human to posit gods and spirits as the explanation for otherwise inexplicable features of experience.

By this avenue, Boyer and Dennett have revived the spirit of English anthropologists like Sir James Frazer, Edmund Spenser, and Edward Burnett Tylor, who applied the formative theses of anthropology to much the same end that Freud put psychology in *The Future of An Illusion*. The triptych in which I earlier placed that book may be considered part of a rear-guard movement to sustain those theses against the changing tide of 20<sup>th</sup> century thought. The history of those discarded explanations is, itself, interesting, but for the moment the important point is their lineage. Like d’Holbach, the Victorian anthropologists began with the premise that religion grew out of the errors of the barbaric ages before Reason took hold in the human mind, and they were often guilty of selecting and interpreting

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<sup>30</sup> Dennett goes so far as to present an argument, in Appendix C, to the effect that Boyer favors meme theory *in effect*, despite Boyer’s explicit objections to the theory.

<sup>31</sup> *Religion Explained*, 26

<sup>32</sup> *BtS*, 106-107

<sup>33</sup> The details are recounted in more detail in “The Flattening of Historical Perspective.”

their evidence to match the theories they favored.<sup>34</sup> They were, in effect, providing an ostensibly scientific bridge, connecting the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the Rationalism of the 18<sup>th</sup>. By presenting the work of Boyer and his peers as the most reasonable guide to “what questions we ought to be trying to answer,”<sup>35</sup> Dennett has extended that bridge to the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup>.



To many readers, it will do doubt seem that I have been courting charges of irrationalism with this essay. One of the rhetorical virtues of a doctrine like Rationalism is that it seems, on the face of it, eminently reasonable; it thus becomes difficult to offer up a critique of versions of the doctrine without seeming to favor the opposite, whatever that may be. To dispel any potential for confusion, then, allow me to acknowledge that reason figures as one of the most potent tools of the human cognitive apparatus, and it is, by no means, my intention to deny the benefits humanity has accrued through its judicious use. Rather, my concern is that some traditions, such as the Rationalism of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, elevate reason to something like the goddess Reason idolized at the peak of the French Revolution. The power of that Reason is its unanswerability, its propensity to end discussions. It has the same rhetorical effect that accusations of heresy must have had during the reign of the Spanish Inquisition, since most people would rather fall silent rather than seem to be an enemy of Reason. It becomes, that is to say, a kind of orthodoxy, even against the wishes of those who have advocated it.

Earlier,<sup>36</sup> I suggested that a profitable distinction could be drawn between New Atheists (as representing certain perceptions about religion and society) and polemical atheists (as engaging in a particular discourse about the same), with the Four Horsemen alternating between those roles. When it comes to their advocacy of Rationalism, it is sometimes unclear in which capacity they are writing. No doubt they sometimes guilelessly represent the latter-day inheritance of *la coterie holbachique*, reiterating its premises because their own perspectives are inexorably rooted therein. But

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<sup>34</sup> See “The Taxonomy of Religion”; Evans-Pritchard’s *Theories of Primitive Religion* places the status of those early theories in a more modern context. For Dennett’s rejection of more modern anthropologists and historians, see also “The Diagnostics of Belief.”

<sup>35</sup> *BtS*, 108

<sup>36</sup> “Introduction”

Rationalism may also serve as a means of constraining debate, and there are indications throughout their books that the Four Horsemen have employed it to that end.

Harris proves the least compromising in his use of the Reason as a discursive tool, and the whole of the second chapter of *The End of Faith* is given over to the purpose of constraining debate. So also is the dialogical opposition between Reason and religion as a form of irrationalism most explicit in Harris' work, as when he writes that the goal of that book is "to help close the door to a certain style of irrationality."<sup>37</sup> But precisely because Harris refuses to mince words on that count, he demands the least attention.

Dennett, as always, strikes the more solicitous pose. Consider, for example, his insistence that, "The idea is not to bulldoze people with science, but to get them to see that things they already know, or could know, have implications for how they should want to respond to the issues under discussion."<sup>38</sup> The first clause does, indeed, seem to embody the sort of "ecumenical effort" by which Dennett has proposed that "we can work *together* toward mutually comprehended and accepted visions of what is good and what is just." But what does it mean to say that you want people to see that what they "could know" ought to have implications for "how they should want to respond" to an issue? That seems to presuppose a preliminary goal of educating them about those things, so that they *will* want to respond as you suppose they should. This, it would seem, is what Dennett means when he speaks of the "political process of mutual persuasion and education" to which the discussion must inevitably tend.<sup>39</sup> We have merely come full circle when, in the final paragraph of the book, he reveals that his "central policy recommendation is that we gently, firmly educate the people of the world, so that they can make truly informed choices about their lives."<sup>40</sup> Naturally, the education Dennett has in mind is overwhelmingly scientific, tending toward an emphasis on revived Rationalism. As a corollary he and Dawkins can be seen advocating the view that other forms of education may be regarded as child abuse.<sup>41</sup>

While the goal of empowering people to make truly informed decisions may seem entirely in accord with the principles of liberty, it is worth noting that by a rather circuitous route Dennett has advocated a kind of Rationalistic paternalism. After all, that education entails certain

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<sup>37</sup> *TEoF*, 223

<sup>38</sup> *BtS*, 378

<sup>39</sup> *BtS*, 14

<sup>40</sup> *BtS*, 339

<sup>41</sup> See "The Irreligious Right" for more on this theme.

implications for what the newly educated “should want.” In this regard, Dennett falls directly in line with the Rationalist tradition of using education to determine the political trajectory of the society. In the context of “a political process of mutual persuasion and education,” the polemical appeal of science is that, “*if the science is done right*, everybody has to accept the results.”<sup>42</sup> Despite Dennett’s disclaimer about science’s potential use as a bulldozer, nearly every passage of Appendix B (entitled, with apparently unintentional irony, “More Questions About Science”) functions to constrain discussion of the issues at stake. Its “invitation to an investigation” does not lack for conditions.

In a clumsy and unsubstantiated metaphor, Dennett distinguishes between nationalism and “transnational religions” as “competing lifeboats” – meaning, presumably, strategies for dealing with the “failed states, ethnic violence, and grotesque injustice arising on all sides.”<sup>43</sup> It does not seem to occur to him that nationalism may have been, in the first place, the cause of those crises. This allows Dennett to rebuke those who favor the religious lifeboats, since they are “enjoying the security of the democratic lifeboat while withholding your ultimate allegiance to it.” The term “ultimate allegiance” should be enough to indicate that this is a way of couching Dennett’s “questions about religion” in thoroughly political terms. He argues that,

By availing yourself of the freedom granted you by a nation that honors the freedom of religion, you excuse yourself – as is your right (it’s like “taking the Fifth Amendment” when called to testify in court) – from helping your fellow citizens explore a problem of national and international security of the utmost urgency. You are a free rider, putting your loyalty to your religion ahead of your duty to your fellow citizens.

He continues in this vein for quite sometime, apparently unembarrassed at having couched what is ostensibly a discussion about science in an appeal to nationalist feeling. If, in future editions, the publisher would like to make even more transparent the tactic of shaming the book’s religious readers into attention, they might consider inseting a few photographs of the World Trade Center towers, or perhaps one of the Marine Corps War Memorial at Iwo Jima. The gist of Appendix B is that it is in the readers’ interest to play Dennett’s game, to play it by Dennett’s rules, and to be good sports when

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<sup>42</sup> *BtS*, 373

<sup>43</sup> *BtS*, 360

they inevitably lose at it. If the aim was to forge an understanding, it has succeeded, but only in the illicit sense of the word “forge.”

If there is, as the Horsemen repeatedly insist, a long-standing dispute between science and religion, the Rationalistic use of science to constrain debate is almost certainly a proximate cause. Each of the Horsemen have, by one route or another, recommitted science to those political ends – Harris, through his account of belief and his argument for a “moral landscape”; Dawkins, by invoking evolution and the anthropic principle as part of an argument against theism; both Dawkins and Dennett, in their use of memetic accounts of the origin of religion; and Hitchens, by his reliance on Freudian notions of sexual health. In each case, science becomes the tool for educating the religious as to what they “could know” and “should want” as a consequence.

Here again it grows difficult to draw a hard and fast line between perception and discourse, for the necessity of disseminating the fruits of reason figured heavily in the creed of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Rationalists. “If it could be proved,” writes Bury,

that social evils were due neither to innate and incorrigible disabilities of the human being nor to the nature of things, but simply to ignorance and prejudices, then the improvement of his state, and ultimately the attainment of felicity, would be only a matter of illuminating ignorance and removing errors, of increasing knowledge and diffusing light. The growth of the “universal human reason” [...] must assure a happy destiny to mankind.<sup>44</sup>

To the extent that the New Atheists follow *la coterie holbachique* in associating progress with the reform of the ignorant and infelicitous, we might well expect them to approach Reason with a kind of evangelical fervor and missionary zeal.

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<sup>44</sup> *The Idea of Progress*, 128



## A DRAWING OF LINES

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THE MORMONS, Hitchens tells us,

have assembled a gigantic genealogical database at a huge repository in Utah, and are busy filling it with the names of all the people whose births, marriages, and deaths have been tabulated since records began. Every week, at special ceremonies in Mormon temples, the congregations meet and are given a certain quota of names of the departed to ‘pray in’ to their church.<sup>1</sup>

Though he sympathizes with the offended descendants of Holocaust victims who have been posthumously baptized into the Church of Latter-Day Saints,<sup>2</sup> it seems, to Hitchens, that “the followers of Mr. Smith should be congratulated for even the most simpleminded technological solution” to “the problem of what to do about those who were born before the exclusive ‘revelation,’ or who died without ever having the opportunity to share in its wonders”<sup>3</sup> – a theological problem, since it is necessarily difficult to square the ignorance of past generations with the purported existence of a God who is both benevolent and jealous.

If Hitchens proves more indulgent with posthumous conversion than he is with most other religious practices, it may be because a similar practice obtains among his fellow Horsemen. “I have no right to claim past

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<sup>1</sup> *GING*, 167

<sup>2</sup> Mormons and Jews recently negotiated a pact exempting Jewish Holocaust victims from posthumous baptism; see “Mormons, Jews In New Pact On Baptisms,” Gary Rosenblatt, *The Jewish Times*, September 1, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> *GING*, 167-168

philosophers as putative ancestors of atheism,” Hitchens writes;<sup>4</sup> but he alone seems to have acknowledged that principle, and his adherence to it is uneven, at best. The Horsemen are, in a sense, baptizers of the dead.

Emblematic of this posthumous conversion is Albert Einstein, though closer examination shows him to be an often ambiguous case. Many of his public declarations seem to have been calculated specifically to deflect attention from his personal convictions, whatever they may have been, and onto a critique of popular conceptions of religion. The general tenor seems to have been one of diplomacy over candor, with the result that there has been plenty of room in which to wrangle, so to speak, over possession of his body. “In greater numbers since his death,” Dawkins says, “religious apologists understandably try to claim Einstein as one of their own.”<sup>5</sup> Understandable, perhaps, though not strictly logical – unless it is assumed that Einstein occupied a privileged position from which to declaim authoritatively on the truth value of religion. Presumably Dawkins sees the fallacy, but nevertheless plays the game. A struggle ensues, and the struggle implies a binary situation. Einstein is either for us, or against us. He belongs to the secular scientific establishment, or to the religious apologists. Neither side is willing to recognize that Einstein might not belong to either, or that it might be more appropriate to admiringly label Einstein what Harris dismissively calls Paul Tillich: a “blameless parish of one.”<sup>6</sup>

To solve the problem, Dawkins puts forward the notion of “Einsteinian religion” as an alternative to “supernatural religion.”<sup>7</sup> The problem is not that Einstein’s apparently rather permissive view of gods and religions differed from that of Dawkins, but rather that, “Einstein sometimes invoked the name of God (and he is not the only atheistic scientist to do so), inviting misunderstanding by supernaturalists eager to misunderstand and claim so illustrious a thinker as their own.” It would be a further mistake, Dawkins insists, to suppose that such carelessness indicated that Einstein was indifferent to the concerns that drive polemical atheism, or that Einstein was ignorant of the issues involved. Clergymen who “thought that Einstein, being theologically untrained, had misunderstood the nature of God” were wrong: “On the contrary, Einstein understood very well exactly what he was denying.”<sup>8</sup> Precisely how Einstein knew, as well as how Dawkins knows that he knew, is never explained.

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<sup>4</sup> *GING*, 263

<sup>5</sup> *TGD*, 37

<sup>6</sup> *TEoF*, 63

<sup>7</sup> *TGD*, 33-34

<sup>8</sup> *TGD*, 36

Nor does he explain why a man presumably concerned with atheism would invite so much confusion. Why use the term religion, repeatedly and pointedly, if what you mean is not religion at all? Perhaps Dawkins' knowledge of what Einstein meant when he said "God" or "religion" is another specimen of the clairvoyance that allowed him to discern the "unmistakable" progressive trend in human morality.<sup>9</sup> Dawkins simply knows, without being able to prove it, that when Einstein spoke of religion he "meant something entirely different from what is conventionally meant." That Dawkins makes his case for that "entirely different" understanding by juxtaposing quotations taken out of context and written over a period of many years does little to inspire confidence in his interpretation.

I have noted elsewhere the ambiguity that plagues Dawkins' use of the term "supernatural."<sup>10</sup> Those difficulties necessarily complicate any attempt to understand the formal difference between the Einsteinian and supernatural variations on religion. Ultimately, it may be a distinction without any real diagnostic value, but that hardly matters, since Dawkins employs it specifically for its polemical interest. "My title, *The God Delusion*," he explains, "does not refer to the God of Einstein and the other enlightened scientists of the previous section. That is why I needed to get Einsteinian religion out of the way to begin with: it has a proven capacity to confuse."<sup>11</sup> The conceptual ambiguity allows Dawkins to assure us that, "Great scientists of our time who sound religious usually turn out not to be so when you examine their beliefs more deeply."<sup>12</sup>

He manages to rebaptize not only the dead, but the living as well. At times, these nominal Einsteinians seems less like voluntary recruits than the victims of a press gang. For example, he is willing to concede that, "The cell biologist Ursula Goodenough, in *The Sacred Depths of Nature*, sounds more religious than Hawking or Einstein. [...] She goes so far as to call herself a 'Religious Naturalist'." However, "a careful reading of her books shows that she is really as staunch an atheist as I am."<sup>13</sup> Though she qualifies as religious by her own understanding of the term, Dawkins is able to outright deny Goodenough's self-identification by insisting on the overriding primacy of his own definition of religion. Simply lacking theism would seem to be enough, since theism is, on his account, "the factual

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<sup>9</sup> For which, see "The Flattening of Historical Perspective"

<sup>10</sup> See "Covert Theology."

<sup>11</sup> *TGD*, 41

<sup>12</sup> *TGD*, 35

<sup>13</sup> *TGD*, 34

premise of religion.”<sup>14</sup> This precludes the possibility that a person could be both atheist and religious. Dawkins further gainsays Goodenough’s sincerity by throwing emphasis on the “naturalist” portion of her self-description. In pointing out that “philosophers use ‘naturalist’ in a very different sense, as the opposite of supernaturalist,”<sup>15</sup> he suggests that when Goodenough calls herself a “Religious Naturalist”, we ought to understand the second term as the negation of the first.

Goodenough, as it turns out, does not believe in gods, but insists that atheism does not preclude her from having, as she calls it, a “religious orientation.”<sup>16</sup> Nor is it likely that many would consider Goodenough, who served for four years as the president of the Institute on Religion in an Age of Science, “really as staunch an atheist” as Dawkins, who has actively campaigned against religion for the better part of the last decade. That does not, however, stop him from making her an example of how the ascription of Einsteinian religion can be used to recruit against their will even those who are explicit in claiming a religious orientation.

The process of impressing individual scientists and intellectuals to the cause can be stepped up by use of statistical surveys. Dawkins cites two studies to demonstrate that almost the whole of the scientific community – at least in Britain and the United States – are atheists. The figures for the U.S. come from a correspondence appearing in the magazine *Nature*, entitled “Leading scientists still reject God,”<sup>17</sup> penned by Edward J. Larson and Larry Witham. That article draws its data from the prior publication of Larson and Witham’s findings, also published in *Nature*, but with the contrasting title, “Scientists are still keeping the faith.”<sup>18</sup> That Dawkins chose the later, less methodological source is, in itself, telling. Part of his reason may be that it compares belief between “lesser” and “greater” scientists, with the greater scientists showing a much lower rate of positive belief. The suggestion quoted by the article is that of Peter Atkins saying, “You clearly can be a scientist and have religious beliefs. But I don’t think you can be a real scientist in the deepest sense of the word because they are such alien categories of knowledge.”<sup>19</sup> That squares with Dawkins’ own

<sup>14</sup> *TGD*, 189; that theme is further developed in “Covert Theology” and “The Taxonomy of Religion.”

<sup>15</sup> *TGD*, 34

<sup>16</sup> “There Are Two Flavors of God People,” Jill Neimark, BeliefNet: <http://www.beliefnet.com/News/Science-Religion/2004/06/There-Are-Two-Flavors-Of-God-People.aspx>

<sup>17</sup> *Nature*, Vol. 394, p. 313 (1998).

<sup>18</sup> *Nature*, Vol. 386, pp. 435-436 (1997).

<sup>19</sup> *Nature*, Vol. 394, *op cit*.

position, apparently formulated on a priori grounds: "It is completely as I would expect that American scientists are less religious than the American public generally, and that the most distinguished scientists are the least religious of all."<sup>20</sup> Declarations of that sort are meant to throw professedly religious scientists on the defensive by asserting an either/or relationship: you are either a scientist or a religious believer, but you cannot be both.

As it turns out, the article Dawkins chooses to cite proves less specific about the questions asked in the survey. To facilitate comparison, Larson and Witham employed the same questions formulated by James Leuba when he first conducted the survey in 1916:

- a.* I believe in a God in intellectual and effective communication with humankind, i.e., a God to whom one may pray in expectation of receiving an answer. By "answer," I mean more than the subjective, psychological effect of prayer.
- b.* I do not believe in God as defined above.
- c.* I have no definite belief regarding this question.<sup>21</sup>

In the second *Nature* article, the one cited by Dawkins, those options are rendered by the shorthand formulae, "Personal belief," "Personal disbelief," and "Doubt or agnosticism,"<sup>22</sup> which are ambiguous enough to allow for a broader range of interpretation. It ought to go without saying that the 45.3% who answered *b.* in the original survey do not necessarily qualify as atheists; the way the options are phrased leave open the possibility that they believe in a god or gods defined some other way than in option *a.* There simply is no option offered that could be confidently interpreted as a total disavowal of theism. Nevertheless, Dawkins interprets the survey of the "greater" scientists (meaning, those elected to the National Academy of Sciences) as an "overwhelming preponderance of atheists."<sup>23</sup>

It would be interesting to make the same sort of comparison with the research Dawkins cites for Britain, to the effect that 78.8% of Fellows of the Royal Society, England's foremost scientific institution, are atheists. Unfortunately the study by R. Elisabeth Cornwell and Michael Stirrat, which was unpublished when *The God Delusion* went to print in 2006, and from which Dawkins was allowed "to quote preliminary results," apparently remains unpublished today, a full four years later. Dawkins appears to be the

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<sup>20</sup> *TGD*, 127

<sup>21</sup> *Nature*, Vol. 386, *op cit.*

<sup>22</sup> *Nature*, Vol. 394, *op cit.*

<sup>23</sup> *TGD*, 126

only person to have referenced it directly; all other citations I have found are to Dawkins' pre-publication summation. The only option Dawkins quotes directly reads, "I believe in a personal God, that is one who takes an interest in individuals, hears and answers prayers, is concerned with sin and transgressions, and passes judgement,"<sup>24</sup> which suggests the same sort of incomplete battery offered by the Larson and Witham survey. It is presumably by that standard that the study found "a massive 213 unbelievers and a mere 12 believers." But, of course, the belief in question is of a very specific kind.

There is then, a disparity between the questions asked by actual research into the theistic beliefs of scientists, and the conclusions Dawkins attempts to derive from such research. His formulation of Einsteinian religion as an excusable alternative to supernatural religion provides a means of presenting a unified front, in spirit if not in reality, and Dawkins can further sharpen those indistinct borders by simply calling into question the sincerity of those who refuse to go quietly. Some scientists, he argues, maintain the charade of religious allegiance only "out of loyalty to the tribe," as he depicts Martin Rees having told him. Robert Winston he challenged "to admit that his Judaism was of exactly this character and that he didn't really believe in anything supernatural."<sup>25</sup> Winston, in return, has called *The God Delusion* "divisive" and "irresponsible."<sup>26</sup>

In light of that pattern, is it too much to suggest that the fault may not lie with the nominal Einsteinians? The standard to which they are expected to adhere may simply be too exacting. As Dennett says,

Even deep in the trenches of cognitive neuroscience, I find annoying echoes and shadows of this prejudice, with us 'hardheaded' materialists forever on the defensive against the now practically extinct species of 'tenderhearted' dualists, who seem (to laypeople at least) to occupy the moral high ground simply because they believe in the immateriality of the soul."<sup>27</sup>

That tone of annoyance rings throughout much of the Four Horsemen's work. Even so pre-eminent a critic of religion as the author of *Why I Am Not a Christian* sometimes fails to live up, but Dawkins is willing to explain

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<sup>24</sup> *TGD*, 128

<sup>25</sup> *TGD*, 35

<sup>26</sup> "Robert Winston criticizes dangerous 'science delusion'," *The Guardian*, Sept. 12, 2008.

<sup>27</sup> *BtS*, 306

away such breaches. Of Bertrand Russell's uncertainty over the Ontological Argument, Dawkins hastens to "suspect that he was an exaggeratedly fair-minded atheist, over-eager to be disillusioned if logic seemed to require it."<sup>28</sup> Better such solicitousness than that Russell should have ever actually considered the argument sound on rational grounds. Any deviation from the party line is met with incredulity, as when Dawkins writes, "I simply do not believe that [Stephen Jay] Gould could possibly have meant much of what he wrote in *Rock of Ages*."<sup>29</sup> Flat denial rescues both men from the possibility that they wrote such things because they believed them.

These latter strategies allow Harris and Hitchens to rescue a number of other culture heroes from the appearance of sincerity. The general form of their argument is that, "Religious moderation is the product of secular knowledge and scriptural ignorance – and it has no bona fides, in religious terms, to put it on par with fundamentalism."<sup>30</sup> Once that principle is granted, religious moderates of all stripes may be forcibly recruited to the cause of secular atheism. In effect, that allows the polemical atheist to claim the most pacific elements of the religious community, while simultaneously keeping those most prone to violence squarely confined to the religionist camp.



An illustrative example may be seen in Harris' response to research on the topic of suicide terrorism. The political scientist Robert A. Pape has argued "that suicide terrorism is best understood as a strategic means to achieve certain well-defined nationalist goals and should not be considered a consequence of religious ideology."<sup>31</sup> That conclusion was drawn on the basis of a study that, at first glance, would seem to be exactly the sort of inquiry Harris demands throughout *The End of Faith*. If Harris resists its conclusions, that may be simply because they fail to stand in support of his agenda.

As director of the University of Chicago's Project on Suicide Terrorism, Pape surveyed every report of suicide terrorism that took place between

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<sup>28</sup> *TGD*, 106

<sup>29</sup> *TGD*, 81

<sup>30</sup> *TEoF*, 21

<sup>31</sup> *TEoF*, 260, fn. 2; the paraphrase belongs to Harris. For Pape's own explanation, see "The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism," *American Political Science Review* 97, no 3 (2003), 20-32, or the fuller account in *Dying to Win* (Random House:2005).

1980 and 2003, taking into account the social and political contexts of each, as well as the religious affiliation of the suicide terrorist, whenever discernible. Harris' response seems to sweep all of that away in favor of a more impressionistic criteria that is, perhaps by design, not subject to peer review. "Like most commentators on this infernal wastage of human life," Harris retorts, "Pape seems unable to imagine what it would be like to actually believe what millions of Muslims profess to believe."<sup>32</sup> The view Harris prefers – even, apparently, the exclusion of actual systematic study of the phenomenon – is that, "Suicide bombing, in the Muslim world at least, is an explicitly religious phenomenon that is inextricable from notions of martyrdom and jihad, predictable on their basis, and sanctified by their logic. It is no more secular an activity than prayer is."<sup>33</sup>

Elsewhere, Harris dismisses the suggestion that Sri Lanka's Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (who had, until the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the same year that *The End of Faith* was released, accounted for about half of all such attacks) represent a secular example of suicide terrorism by saying that, "While the motivations of the Tigers are not explicitly religious, they are Hindus who undoubtedly believe many improbable things about the nature of life and death."<sup>34</sup> Does that indicate a double standard? In application, the principle seems to be that anything good done by religious adherents qualifies as moderation, and is thus the result of secular influence, while any religious association whatsoever must be taken as the motivation whenever radically destructive behavior is involved. Hitchens makes much the same argument with regards to the Japanese Kamikaze during World War II, a tact that might seem controversial with regard to Harris, who argues that Buddhism "is not a religion of faith, or a religion at all, in the Western sense." This despite the "millions of Buddhists who do not seem to know this."<sup>35</sup> Indeed, it would draw Harris into fatal self-contradiction to classify Buddhism as a religion, since he considers himself a Buddhist and recommends "the esoteric teachings of Buddhism" as "the most complete methodology we have for discovering the intrinsic freedom of consciousness, unencumbered by any dogma."<sup>36</sup> But no doubt the principle is flexible enough that Harris could join in Hitchens' condemnation of such "'Eastern' solutions" by arguing that Japanese nationalist imperialism was, itself, a strain of religious fundamentalism. Each of his fellow Horsemen,

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<sup>32</sup> *TEoF*, 260; cf. "The Diagnostics of Belief" for more on Harris' use of this criteria for inquiry.

<sup>33</sup> *TEoF*, 261

<sup>34</sup> *TEoF*, 239, fn. 2

<sup>35</sup> *TEoF*, 293, fn. 12; see also "The Taxonomy of Religion."

<sup>36</sup> *TEoF*, 293-294, fn. 12



not excluding Hitchens, have equivocated over the religious status of Buddhism, equitably leaving room for Harris on their side of the line.<sup>37</sup>

Just how far is it possible to stretch that principle of inclusion? As though to demonstrate, Harris argues that, though “Gandhi was undoubtedly the twentieth century’s most influential pacifist,” he was also “a religious dogmatist” whose application of the principles of pacifism was “ethically suspect.”<sup>38</sup> In particular, he deplores Gandhi’s suggestion that Jews could have resisted the Holocaust by committing mass suicide. Hitchens takes up this theme, by depicting Gandhi’s struggle against British imperialism as a struggle toward a foregone conclusion.<sup>39</sup> “There is no dishonor in that,” Hitchens allows,

but it is exactly his religious convictions that make his legacy a dubious rather than a saintly one. To state the matter shortly: he wanted India to revert to a village-dominated and primitive ‘spiritual’ society, he made power-sharing with Muslims much harder, and he was quite prepared to make hypocritical use of violence when he thought it might suit him.<sup>40</sup>

That last charge is rather trumped up, since the “hypocritical use of violence” Hitchens seems to have in mind was really nothing more than Gandhi seizing on the opportunities afforded by the shifting of British attention to conflicts elsewhere in the Empire. The other two charges Hitchens brings against him can just as easily be explained in political and historical as in religious terms. But the point is that both Harris’ and Hitchens’ interpretations allow a dyed-in-the-wool pacifist like Gandhi to be classed alongside suicide bombers, and precisely where Harris’ principle might otherwise be taken to imply that Gandhi’s had inherited nonviolent resistance from modern secularism.

Similarly, *God is Not Great* almost never mentions a clerical acquaintance without hastening to point out their personal failings. Thus we encounter the headmaster who, despite being a “sadist and closeted homosexual,” instructed a young Hitchens on the value of faith, “(and whom I have long since forgiven because he ignited my interest in history and lent me my first

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<sup>37</sup> *BtS*, 8; *TGD*, 59; *GING*, 199.

<sup>38</sup> *TEoF*, 202

<sup>39</sup> It is likely both authors here reflect the influence of Orwell’s “Reflections on Gandhi.”

<sup>40</sup> *GING*, 182

copy of P. G. Wodehouse).<sup>41</sup> Likewise, we are told that the Greek Orthodox archbishop who presided over both Hitchens' communion into the church as well as his marriage, "later became an enthusiastic cheerleader and fund-raiser for his fellow Orthodox Serbian mass murderers Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic, who filled countless mass graves all over Bosnia"<sup>42</sup>; and so on. Either claim might be quite true, but their value as evidence in favor of a general point is limited by their anecdotal nature.

Or consider the case of the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. Hitchens admits that "the rhetoric with which King addressed his followers was designed to evoke the very story that they all knew best – the one that begins when Moses first tells Pharaoh to 'Let my people go.'"<sup>43</sup> Yet Hitchens presents the religious language as a calculated, perhaps cynical, rhetorical strategy. "If the population had been raised from its mother's knee to hear the story of Xenophon's *Anabasis*, and the long wearying dangerous journey of the Greeks to their triumphant view of the sea, that allegory might have done just as well," he argues. "As it was, though, the 'Good Book' was the only point of reference that everybody had in common."<sup>44</sup> Hitchens goes so far as to doubt that King had any religious convictions at all, on the premise that he did not, to Hitchens' satisfaction, preach the doctrine that "those who injured and reviled him were to be threatened with any revenge or punishment, in this world or the next, save the consequences of their own brute selfishness and stupidity."<sup>45</sup> Hitchens concludes of that, "In no real as opposed to nominal sense, was he a Christian."<sup>46</sup> Presumably, the three years King spent at Crozer Theological Seminary, as well as the four years spent studying systematic theology at Boston University, were part of his grand plan to masquerade as one.

The effect of a similar interpretation may be evident in some of the research that Dennett has produced since the publication of *Breaking the Spell*. Shortly after the release of "Preachers who are not Believers,"<sup>47</sup> the online journal *Killing the Buddha* issued a critique raising many of these same questions. Its author, Daniel Silliman, complained that, "Dennett and LaScola dismiss the nuance in what their subjects say, foisting a severely restrictive framework onto the ministers' carefully thought-out positions. Even in the title, the study labels them 'not believers,' though that doesn't

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<sup>41</sup> *GING*, 3-4

<sup>42</sup> *GING*, 16

<sup>43</sup> *GING*, 173-174

<sup>44</sup> *GING*, 175

<sup>45</sup> *GING*, 176

<sup>46</sup> *GING*, 176

<sup>47</sup> See "The Diagnostics of Belief" for a closer reading.

really describe them at all.”<sup>48</sup> In response, “Rick,” one of the pseudonymous “closeted nonbelievers” from the study, praised Silliman’s article, claiming to have told Dennett and LaScola “that I would be willing to own the label of ‘different believer’ instead; that is, ‘different’ from a literalist and a believer in supernatural theism which seem to be the definitions he mostly uses when he attributes atheism to anyone not in that rather narrow ballpark.”<sup>49</sup> This makes for a curious complement to Dawkins and Harris’ efforts to draw the lines inclusive of the scientific community as a whole. Dennett’s premise of “belief in belief” aims at including much of the religious establishment as well, and by a similar tactic of gainsaying what they themselves profess.

Interestingly, Hitchens’ reinterpretation of the work of Martin Luther King Jr. and Dennett’s study of “unbelieving clergy” recruit from the religious establishment at much the same point where Dawkins would locate the highest propensity towards atheism within the scientific establishment, namely among its institutional elite. The early expansion of Christianity throughout pagan Europe was achieved in large part by first converting elite like the kings of pagan tribes; this would almost seem an analogous strategy. Effectively, it cuts off the “lowest common denominator” (as §4 of the eighth chapter of *Breaking the Spell* is called) from the authoritative source of its doctrine. That gambit is all the more daring if we follow Dennett’s suggestion that those who are not authorities on religious doctrine “aren’t really in a good position to judge whether [they] actually believe (passionately or otherwise) in the God of [their] particular creed, or in some other God.”<sup>50</sup> Left in disarray, the theism of the unwashed mob would presumably dissipate for lack of compelling leadership.

But Dennett himself points to (then recoils from) an even more sweeping possibility. Elsewhere we have examined his argument concerning “belief in belief.”<sup>51</sup> “Such a person,” he says of atheistic believers in belief, “doesn’t believe in God but nevertheless thinks that believing in God would be a wonderful state of mind to be in, if only that could be arranged. People who believe in belief in God try to get others to believe in God and, whenever they find their own belief in God flagging, do whatever they can to restore it.”<sup>52</sup> Dennett thereby sets a clever trap for self-described theists. By means

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<sup>48</sup> “Faithful Apostasy,” Daniel Silliman, April 8, 2010 (<http://killingthebuddha.com/mag/dogma/faithful-apostasy/>)

<sup>49</sup> <http://killingthebuddha.com/ktblog/non-believing-pastor-really-believes/>

<sup>50</sup> *BtS*, 224

<sup>51</sup> Cf. “The Diagnostics of Belief.”

<sup>52</sup> *BtS*, 221

of the principle of “belief in belief,” nearly any profession of belief can be surreptitiously converted into a tacit expression of mere belief in belief. “Given the way religious concepts and practices have been designed,” he writes two pages on, “the very behaviors that would be clear evidence of belief in God are also behaviors that would be clear evidence of (only) belief in belief in God.”<sup>53</sup> The apotheosis of this line of reasoning would be that there is no actual belief in God, only profession. Yet, here he retreats. Of the premise “that belief in God exists,” Dennett parenthetically asks, “who could doubt that?”<sup>54</sup> The certainty that belief in God exists seems impossible to reconcile with the principle that we can never distinguish between belief and mere belief in belief. Nor does Dennett attempt to resolve it, which may suggest that he feels some vested interest in maintaining the reality of a dispute between atheism and a more-than-nominal theism – or at least that he feels a vested interest in professing it.



In all of the preceding, the reader may discern some echo of the objection that “No true Scotsman would do such a thing.” As it so happens, a rather indecorous public exchange passed between Dawkins and Anthony Flew, the philosopher who coined that very fallacy. Flew (or maybe, as Dawkins would have it, “a Christian ghost writer, Roy Varghese,” secretly writing on Flew’s behalf) denounced Dawkins as a “secularist bigot” and questioned Dawkins’ use of quotation to recruit Einstein to his cause. Dawkins, in return, gallantly rushed to Flew’s defense by suggesting that Flew was too infirm to have actually read *The God Delusion* or to have written the book that, at the time, was being trumpeted as evidence of Flew’s conversion to theism.<sup>55</sup> If Dawkins lost little respect for Flew over the incident, it may be because he seems to have had precious little respect for him in the first place. In a footnote to the excuse made on behalf of Bertrand Russell and quoted above, Dawkins compared the two philosophers, saying that, “On the other hand, Russell was a great philosopher. Russell won the Nobel Prize. Maybe Flew’s alleged conversion will be rewarded with the Templeton Prize.”<sup>56</sup> This might seem rough handling for a man whose

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<sup>53</sup> *BtS*, 223

<sup>54</sup> *BtS*, 221

<sup>55</sup> “Richard Dawkins branded ‘secular bigot’ by veteran philosopher,” *The Telegraph*, Aug. 2, 2008.

<sup>56</sup> *TGD*, 106

contribution to contemporary atheist thought is all but immeasurable,<sup>57</sup> but Flew had no doubt become intractable and immune to reform. The embarrassment he caused simply could not be ameliorated by invoking Einsteinian religion.

To recognize the slight in Dawkins' mention of the Templeton Prize, it is first necessary to understand that the rhetorical struggle over public intellectuals like those mentioned above means more than the recruitment of a few individuals capable of reflecting an aura of respectability onto atheism and irreligion. Since at least the 18<sup>th</sup> century there has been a long-standing and, at times, acrimonious dispute over the status of religion in any society informed by modern science.<sup>58</sup> Since the publication of *The End of Faith*, the dispute has gone through another one of its periodic flare-ups. Dawkins and Harris, along with related public figures like P.Z. Myers and Reason Project alumnus Jerry Coyne, have argued in a variety of publications against the "accommodationist" stance, which holds that science and religion are, or at least can be made, compatible. Perhaps the most celebrated example of modern accommodationist theory is Stephen Jay Gould's "Non-Overlapping Magisteria," which holds that, when they keep to their proper place, science and religion need rarely, if ever, come into conflict. "The lack of conflict between science and religion," Gould wrote, "arises from a lack of overlap between their respective domains of professional expertise – science in the empirical constitution of the universe, and religion in the search for proper ethical values and the spiritual meaning of our lives."<sup>59</sup> Dawkins' earlier quoted exclamation of disbelief was made precisely to rescue Gould from such accommodationist beliefs. Both he and Harris offer arguments to the end that science can provide "spiritual meaning," and *The Moral Landscape* attempts to make the case for a science of ethics.

For non-accommodationists like Dawkins and Harris, science and religion necessarily come into conflict, and in all such cases, science wins. But such differences of opinion hardly explain the public debates that arise. Unlike the ongoing debate between the scientific community and Creationist educators, a notable feature of the exchange that took place in the wake of the publication of Chris Mooney and Sheril Kirshenbaum's book *Unscientific American: How Scientific Illiteracy Threatens Our Future*<sup>60</sup> was the relative absence of religious spokespersons or outright skeptics of

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<sup>57</sup> See, for example, "Theology and Falsification," which concisely anticipated much of *Breaking the Spell* by nearly 60 years.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. "The Heirs of *La Coterie Holbachique*"

<sup>59</sup> "Nonoverlapping Magisteria," *Natural History*, 106, March, 1997, p. 16

<sup>60</sup> Basic Books:2009

science. Both sides of the debate were in favor of broader acceptance of contemporary scientific models and tended to be allied against, for example, religious opponents of evolutionary theory. The argument over accommodationism is, first and foremost, a debate between colleagues. All of which suggests that what may really be at stake is the question of solidarity to the cause. Thus, the studies Dawkins used to “discover” a “preponderance of atheists” in the top ranks of the scientific community are supposed to point the reader to “the polar opposition between the religiosity of the American public at large and the atheism of the intellectual elite.”<sup>61</sup>

And here we draw near to the point. That Einstein’s memory apparently will not be allowed to occupy the ambiguous space Einstein the man seemed so intent on constructing is emphatically not the result of idle curiosity. A concern over identity compels both groups to draw their lines with reference to the figures they think will be most beneficial to their cause. They are, in a sense, building armies. Harris illustrates the point when, expanding on the unfortunate rhetoric of a “clash of civilizations” between Islam and the West, he writes that,

we have a problem with Christianity and Judaism as well. It is time we recognize that all reasonable men and women have a common enemy. It is an enemy so near to us, and so deceptive, that we keep its counsel even as it threatens to destroy the very possibility of human happiness. Our enemy is nothing other than faith itself.<sup>62</sup>

During the Second World War, Wehrmacht soldiers wore belt buckles reading *Gott mit uns*, “God with us,” as though the Germans had somehow managed to recruit the Creator. The posthumous recruitment of prominent historical figures functions much the same way, drawing with it the specter of authority and respectability. For the purposes of this inquiry, it matters little which side, if any, the more controversial figures like Einstein would have actually endorsed. The more crucial interest lies with the struggle. Just as Hitchens locates in the Mormon ritual of “praying in” the dead a kind of embarrassment over the problem of theodicy, certain figures prove embarrassingly resistant to attempts to draft an atheist or irreligious front. If Einstein had made one unambiguous and undeniable declaration of solidarity with the sort of polemical atheism Dawkins endorses, he likely would have warranted far fewer mentions in *The God Delusion* and its literary kin. The lengths to which apologists for both camps will go in order

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<sup>61</sup> TGD, 127

<sup>62</sup> TEOF, 131

to stake their claim on a liminal figure like Einstein demonstrates the tactical value placed on him.

Some figures, on the other hand, are simply too recalcitrant to recruit. When that happens, it becomes technically necessary to denounce them. If possible, it may even be warranted to place stumbling blocks in their paths. An eminent scientist like Francis Collins might seem, at first glance, an enviable acquisition to the menagerie of scientists collected above. As Harris acknowledges, “Dr. Collins’ credentials are impeccable: he is a physical chemist, a medical geneticist and the former head of the Human Genome Project.”<sup>63</sup> But Collins also happens to be a committed convert to Christianity, and “by his own account, living proof that there is no conflict between science and religion.”<sup>64</sup> No suggestion that Collins could not possibly have meant what he wrote<sup>65</sup> would serve to believably usher him into the atheist camp. Which might go some distance towards explaining why Harris wrote not one, but two articles opposing President Obama’s nomination of Collins as director of the National Institutes of Health.<sup>66</sup> This, like Harris’ op-ed concerning Sarah Palin, is the point at which such line-drawing ascends (or is it a descent?) to the level of political action.

As with the posthumous baptism of ambiguous scientific figures into Einsteinian religion, the political lines can likewise be drawn retroactively. Dawkins presumes to agree with Hitchens in thinking it “likely that Jefferson was an atheist,”<sup>67</sup> despite the fact that Hitchens himself supposes it better to “reserve judgment.”<sup>68</sup> In his own book, Hitchens refers to Jefferson as a deist,<sup>69</sup> but Dawkins simply drafts the deists *en masse*, thereby resolving the discrepancy. Maybe not all of the Founding Fathers of the American Republic make for such easy allies, but Dawkins blithely indicates that here too the lines are drawn in his favor, by claiming “it has been argued that the greatest of them might have been atheists.”<sup>70</sup> How

<sup>63</sup> “Science Is in the Details,” Sam Harris, *The New York Times*, A12, July 27, 2009.

<sup>64</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> specifically in *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* (Free Press:2006).

<sup>66</sup> The second, “The Strange Case of Francis Collins,” was first published August 5, 2009, at [http://www.project-reason.org/archive/item/the\\_strange\\_case\\_of\\_francis\\_collins2/](http://www.project-reason.org/archive/item/the_strange_case_of_francis_collins2/)

<sup>67</sup> *TGD*, 64

<sup>68</sup> *Thomas Jefferson: Author of America*, quoted in *TGD*, 64.

<sup>69</sup> *GING*, 119

<sup>70</sup> *TGD*, 60

fortunate for the Horsemen that they should get to claim all of the “greatest,” and not have to suffer the company of those who were only mediocre or dismal.



If I have devoted a great deal of consideration to the lines drawn by the Four Horsemen, it is because issues of identity never take on more significance than during times of war. Nor have they been unmindful of their own reputations. One interviewer insisted that Dawkins “is probably not joking at all when he says ‘I want to make damn sure there’s a tape recorder running for my last words,’”<sup>71</sup> to protect against rumors of a deathbed conversion of the sort imputed to Darwin. Two weeks after emergency surgery to replace an aorta and aortic arch, Dennett penned an essay for the online journal *Edge*, presumably to head off speculation that he had, like logical positivist A.J. Ayer, experienced a near-death epiphany capable of throwing his atheism into doubt.<sup>72</sup> Both Dawkins and Dennett handle such ruminations in the spirit of good humor, but given the part each has played in the “praying in” of liminal figures, perhaps there is, after all, a serious edge to such proceedings. No one wants to be painted as a traitor, particularly when their own mortality cuts off any hope of defending their reputation from the claim.

When the primary method of resolving disputes is war – be it the war of words indicated by the word polemic, or the threat of literal violence – distinguishing between enemy and ally becomes an activity of paramount importance. Dawkins acknowledges as much. Taking a softer line than Harris, he writes that, “it is frequently and rightly said that wars, and feuds between religious groups or sects, are seldom actually about theological disagreements.”<sup>73</sup> He goes so far as to specify that “of course the troubles in Northern Ireland are political. There really has been economic and political oppression of one group by another [...] There really are genuine grievances and injustices, and these seem to have little to do with religion.”<sup>74</sup> But the false note of accord quickly fades. Coming to the point, he argues that “without religion there would be no labels by which to decide whom to

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<sup>71</sup> “People say I’m strident,” Decca Aitkenhead, *The Guardian*, October 25, 2008.

<sup>72</sup> “Thank Goodness!”, Daniel Dennett, November 3, 2006, [http://www.edge.org/3rd\\_culture/dennett06/dennett06\\_index.html](http://www.edge.org/3rd_culture/dennett06/dennett06_index.html)

<sup>73</sup> *TGD*, 294

<sup>74</sup> *TGD*, 294



oppress and whom to avenge.”<sup>75</sup> This is a subtle but significant variation on a trope of Enlightenment anti-clericalism: that most historical conflict can be explained by reference to religious motivation. Later on, in fact, we find Dawkins straying from his recognition of the political nature of the conflict. “‘Loyalists,’” he writes, “‘is the mealy-mouthed Northern Ireland euphemism for Protestants, just as ‘Nationalists’ is the euphemism for Catholics. People who do not hesitate to brand children ‘Catholics’ or ‘Protestants’ stop short of applying those same religious labels – far more appropriately – to adult terrorists and mobs.’”<sup>76</sup> If the conflict truly is, as Dawkins says, political, then why would it not be more accurate to say, rather, that Catholic is, in that context, a euphemism for Nationalist?

Likewise, Hitchens almost acknowledges the co-optation of religious identity when he recounts the Belfast joke asking whether a man is “Protestant or Catholic atheist.” He takes this as evidence of “how the obsession has rotted even the legendary local sense of humor,” but then goes on to call “rival nationalisms” the “ostensible pretext” for the region’s ongoing conflict, rendering it questionable just whose sense of humor has been rotted by what obsession.<sup>77</sup> In Dawkins’ account, which Hitchens seems to share at times, religion is not the direct cause of most wars, but it does provide a mechanism for constructing the identities that make war possible. As such, it proves uniquely agile as a facilitator of war.

Dawkins follows the Irish example with a capsule version of a history of Indian conflict. “In India at the time of partition, more than a million people were massacred in religious riots between Hindus and Muslims (and fifteen million displaced from their homes),” he writes. “There were no badges other than religious ones with which to label whom to kill. Ultimately, there was nothing to divide them but religion.”<sup>78</sup> This recalls Harris’ interpretation of the Gujarat riots,<sup>79</sup> and the same objections apply. All of which ought to make plain the fallacy in Dawkins’ overarching argument. Any number of identity distinctions can serve as the chalk by which enemy lines are drawn. These are not limited to language, race, ethnicity, party affiliation, vocation, and yes, religion. When Jonathan Swift threw the Lilliputians and the Blefuscutians into war over the trivial issue of which end of an egg ought to be broken, the satire cuts precisely because nearly any trumped-up difference can be made the rallying point for partisans. It would, however, cut the effectiveness of Dawkins’ historical critique to

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<sup>75</sup> *TGD*, 294

<sup>76</sup> *TGD*, 381

<sup>77</sup> *GING*, 18

<sup>78</sup> *TGD*, 295

<sup>79</sup> Cf. “The Flattening of Historical Perspective.”

suppose that, had there been no religious difference between the Irish and British, or the Indians and Pakistanis, some other difference would have been found. Nor does the history of human conflict lack for examples of groups reviving, or even inventing out of whole cloth, “traditions” that emphasize their vested stake in conflicting identities.<sup>80</sup> So while there is nothing unreasonable in pointing out that religion can be made to serve as a label for dividing a population into enemies and allies, it is morbidly laughable to suggest, as Dawkins does, that “without religion, and religiously segregated education, the divide simply would not be there.”<sup>81</sup>

The acute irony here is that the polemical atheists have expended a great deal of effort in creating just that sort of distinct yet malleable division. Atheism becomes a kind of totem around which the Horsemen build their tribe. The sociologist Ruth Benedict, writing in the 1930s, remarked that, given our parochialism in other realms, “we are justified in a little skepticism as to whether our sophistication in the matter of religion is due to the fact that we have outgrown naïve childishness, or simply to the fact that religion is no longer the area of life in which the important modern battles are staged.”<sup>82</sup> The discourse of polemical atheism strives to return religion to its prior status as a staging ground. This is nowhere more clear than in *The End of Faith*, where the syntax of battle rings throughout, and division – both between ally and enemy as well as within the enemy ranks – is a recurring motif. But it is likewise implicit in the work of his companion authors.

It may seem alarmist to say so. Some have argued that atheism is inherently pacifistic. No doubt Dawkins believes it when he claims that, “Individual atheists may do evil things but they don’t do evil things in the name of atheism,”<sup>83</sup> or when he asks, “why would anyone go to war for the sake of an absence of belief?”<sup>84</sup> The question is, perhaps, rhetorical, but the books of the Four Horsemen provide their own answer. When discourse presents religion as inherently evil, the rationale for declaring war is unmistakable, however unintentional. And though the authors themselves no doubt value peace, literally militant atheists would hardly need twist the polemic of the Four Horsemen to turn it into the slogans of a very real conflict. The Four Horsemen themselves would no doubt eschew the suggestion that they have provided the rationale for literal conflict; if they

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<sup>80</sup> Cf. eg. *The Invention of Tradition*, Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds. (Cambridge:1983)

<sup>81</sup> *TGD*, 294

<sup>82</sup> *Patterns of Culture*, (1934)

<sup>83</sup> *TGD*, 315

<sup>84</sup> *TGD*, 316

like, they may think of it as a “free-floating rationale” to which they have merely given definition because they were unable to withstand such potent memes.

Whether we call it a meme or a motif, the language of violence recurs throughout the work of the Four Horsemen. Consider, for example, the martial tones in which Dawkins describes the impact of *Origin of the Species*. The young Darwin, he writes, admired Paley’s *Natural Theology*, but “the mature Darwin blew it out of the water. There has probably never been a more devastating rout of popular belief by clever reasoning than Charles Darwin’s destruction of the argument from design.”<sup>85</sup> One would almost suppose that Darwin had set out to defeat it. Of a particular passage on the evolution of the eye, Dawkins presents Darwin as “drawing his opponents towards him so that the punch, when it came, struck the harder.”<sup>86</sup> This vision of Darwin the pugilist sits uneasily with the more diplomatic view of Darwin we see in his *Autobiography* or any number of biographies written about him. The picture Dawkins gives may be inflected with the Huxley’s reputation as “Darwin’s bulldog,” or with his own as “Darwin’s Rottweiler.”

It would be easy enough to dismiss such flourishes as mere poetic license were they not part of the larger pattern of choosing sides. The least that can be said in their defense is that, for three of the Four Horsemen, the polemical stance remains relatively muted; it reaches its apogee in the Harris’ books and articles. “The contest between our religions is zero-sum,” he argues. “Religious violence is still with us because our religions are intrinsically hostile to one another. Where they appear otherwise, it is because secular knowledge and secular interests are restraining the most lethal improprieties of faith.”<sup>87</sup> Scrutiny of religion has recently become critical “because our neighbors are now armed with chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons,”<sup>88</sup> making it possible, perhaps even “all but certain that our newspapers will begin to read more and more like the book of Revelation.”<sup>89</sup> Dennett cites similar concerns to give his own inquiry urgency, even delving into the dubious field of “lifeboat ethics” to make his case.<sup>90</sup> Hitchens concurs that, “as I write, a version of the Inquisition is

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<sup>85</sup> *TGD*, 103

<sup>86</sup> *TGD*, 149

<sup>87</sup> *TEoF*, 225

<sup>88</sup> *TEoF*, 14

<sup>89</sup> *TEoF*, 152

<sup>90</sup> *BiS*, 360

about to lay hands on a nuclear weapon. [...] This puts the confrontation between faith and civilization on a whole new footing.”<sup>91</sup>

Harris connects the potential for wide scale destruction and violence to the religious belief in the immanent end of the world. The irony is that, in doing so, he has constructed just as potent an Apocalyptic vision. “Imagine what it would be like for our descendants to experience the fall of civilization,” he writes in the Epilogue to *The End of Faith*.

Imagine failures of reasonableness so total that our largest bombs finally fall upon our largest cities in defense of our religious differences. What would it be like for the unlucky survivors of such a holocaust to look back upon the hurtling career of human stupidity that led them over the precipice?

And then, as though the relocate the Apocalypse to the present: “This world is simply ablaze with bad ideas.”<sup>92</sup>

Never does he give any indication that he recognizes how such rhetoric could contribute to literal militancy. Yet, the equation should be plain to see. If religions are intrinsically hostile to one another, and if the development of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons has made it all but inevitable that such conflicts will result in virtual Apocalypse, then does it not follow, as Harris suggests in the case of “Muslim societies,” that secular society “will be obliged to protect our interests in the world with force?”<sup>93</sup> Perhaps this is doing damage to Harris’ intended argument by taking these quotations out of their proper context, but is a secularist with violent proclivities any less likely to read them out of context than a religious apologist who wants to paint Harris in the worst possible tones? The point is that, in constructing their unremittingly negative discourse about religion, faith and theism, the polemical atheists have made it possible to justify what some of them seem to think impossible: war in the name of atheism.

Here, we are thrown on the fork of a dilemma. As I wrote in the introduction to these essays, taking these arguments seriously often means being unkind to their authors. If we are generous to the polemical atheists, then we will accept at face value their conviction that atheism is inherently incapable of fomenting conflict. But if we take their arguments seriously, how can we avoid the conclusion that, in the way that they have argued for atheism and irreligion, they have provided the rationale for just such conflict? Harris in particular insists that beliefs logically entail behaviors,

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<sup>91</sup> *GING*, 280

<sup>92</sup> *TEoF*, 224

<sup>93</sup> *TEoF*, 152

and that if we want to understand the violent behavior of a given person, we can do no better than to recognize violence as the logical consequence of what that person claims to believe. Harris, of course, is talking about the suicide bomber's purported belief in the promise of paradise, but gives no reason to suppose that secular beliefs should not be just as consequential. And yet, on the whole, I am inclined to believe – even if it means temporarily ceasing to take them seriously – that the Four Horsemen are sincere when they say they are not advocating violence in the name of atheism. Rather, they are merely being naïve about the way in which their polemic will be received, if not now, then by posterity. By no means am I suggesting that they have intended it to be received as a call to arms, merely that such is the potential consequence of an irresponsible rhetoric.

Nor is outright physical conflict likely to spontaneously erupt. As with other modern wars, any war in the name of atheism is likely to be preceded by a phase of political struggle. The decidedly uncivil wars in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia; the violent struggles in Gujarat that Harris invoked as examples of purely religious conflict; the World Wars – all were sparked by the attempts of one group to use the political apparatus of established society to restrict the growth and rights of another. Even more than the motif of martial imagery that recurs throughout much of their work, the political suggestions that punctuate the Horsemen's arguments strike the most alarming note in the books they have written.

But if they are more or less aligned on the question of where to draw the lines, as well as that of how to characterize those who fill out the enemy camp, one point on which the Horsemen find very little common ground is that of how to characterize their own. Harris has argued that atheists should disown the term atheism, that “our use of the label is a mistake – and a mistake of some consequence.”<sup>94</sup> He premises that rejection in part on the assertion that atheism should be regarded as the default position. Dawkins, by contrast, seems to have no problem with the title, and has even argued in favor of adopting the much reviled “militant atheism.”<sup>95</sup> That falls perhaps not too far from Hitchens' flirtation with the term “anti-theism.” On analogy with the homosexual community's appropriation of the previously derogatory “gay,” Dennett has coined the term “bright” for unbelievers, but thus far the term seems not to have caught on. Dawkins, though not himself adopting it, has leant some support to the idea, while Hitchens calls it

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<sup>94</sup> “The Problem with Atheism,” a lecture given at the Atheist Alliance conference, September 28, 2007, and transcribed at [http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/sam\\_harris/2007/10/the\\_problem\\_with\\_atheism.html](http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/sam_harris/2007/10/the_problem_with_atheism.html)

<sup>95</sup> “An atheist call to arms,” TED February 2002.

conceited, a “cringe-making proposal.”<sup>96</sup> In light of their decisiveness with respect to the identity of others, this unresolved question may seem curious. But as Harris implies in rejecting the “atheist” label, there is a strategic value in presenting one’s own side as so normal that it warrants no name. As a group, they become rhetorically elusive; it is difficult to pin a criticism on a group you cannot name.

Nor has the author of these essays found it practical to exercise a critical eye without, in turn, engaging in a bit of discourse. I see little point in denying that it is discourse to refer to our subject as New Atheism, or as polemical atheism. Discourse can be egregiously false and manipulative, but it is not innately so, and we can hardly talk about any subject without practicing it at least a little. The test of such discourse is, on the one hand, its utility – though utility alone cannot justify it, as I have hoped to imply throughout – and on the other hand, the given discourse’s fidelity to the subject it claims to circumscribe. Whether or not our interpretations of New Atheism, as well as our description of polemical atheism, stand true to life is a matter for the reader to decide, and the validity of the critique that stands on such discourse depends largely on that judgment. These essays have hopefully demonstrated that the discourse by which the polemical atheists have constructed their visions of religion, theism, faith and conflict bears little fidelity to those phenomenon as they are encountered outside the pages of their books. They have staked the entire gambit on the utility of their critique. Their discourse is not idle; it is directed towards certain ends, and it is those very ends which warrant thinking of them as the philosophical core of a political inclination: the Irreligious Right.

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<sup>96</sup> *GING*, 5

## THE IRRELIGIOUS RIGHT

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TO ILLUSTRATE THE EASE with which the human mind can partition even mutually exclusive beliefs, Harris recounts a trip he and his wife took to France.<sup>1</sup> “As the events of September 11 still cast a shadow over the world,” he recalls, “we had decided to avoid obvious terrorist targets while traveling. First on our list of such places was the American embassy in Paris.” Upon arriving in Paris, they embark on a largely unfruitful search for hotel rooms. When they finally find one, they are offered an upgrade, free of charge, to a suite overlooking the American embassy. They take it, not reflecting until later on that they “had spent the better part of the day simultaneously trying to *avoid* and *gain proximity* to the very same point in space.” They had encountered the embassy in two different cognitive contexts, and failed to connect them. “In the first case,” Harris explains, “it signified a prime terrorist target; in the second, it promised a desirable view from a hotel window.”

That the story centers around the emblem of American political presence in the world at large makes it a particularly apropos allegory for the politics of the Irreligious Right. Elsewhere,<sup>2</sup> we have noted that the Four Horsemen all incline philosophically toward the pioneers of 18<sup>th</sup> century French liberalism. Thus it might seem natural to suppose that the Horsemen themselves would embody that liberalism, or at least lean toward the political left. Harris certainly seems to think so, and in at least one article he has sought to establish his “liberal bona fides” by saying that he would

like to see taxes raised on the wealthy, drugs decriminalized and homosexuals free to marry. I also think that the Bush administration deserves most of the criticism it has received in the last six years —

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<sup>1</sup> *TEoF*, 55-56

<sup>2</sup> “The Heirs of *La Coterie Holbachique*”

especially with respect to its waging of the war in Iraq, its scuttling of science and its fiscal irresponsibility.<sup>3</sup>

But those are simplistic signifiers of alignment with the relatively centrist left of American politics, and the rest of the article as a whole gives a more mixed impression of his political inclinations.

For further evidence of their liberalism we might turn to Dennett, who asserts that his “sacred values are obvious and quite ecumenical: democracy, justice, life, love and truth (in alphabetical order).”<sup>4</sup> But Dennett is not primarily a political animal,<sup>5</sup> and any estimation of his commitment to those values will require closer scrutiny. Throughout *The God Delusion*, Dawkins, perhaps the least overtly political of the Four, can be found siding with historical figures like Jefferson, Huxley, even Bishop John Shelby Spong, all of whom he characterizes as liberal.

The waters first turn cloudy with Hitchens. Easily the most openly (one might say, brazenly) political of the Four, he also has the most tumultuous political history. Though long an outspoken Marxist socialist, he has, at least since September 2001, sided loudly with the conservative administration of former President George W. Bush, very much against the expectation of his peers. At the same time, he continues to proclaim the superiority of the Western liberal tradition. This is, it turns out, not so contradictory as one might suppose, since the defense of Western liberalism was one of the speaking points on which the neoconservatives built their platform.

Nor is there any real contradiction between granting to all Four Horsemen their professed allegiance to the tradition of French liberalism, and yet referring to them as the vanguard of an Irreligious Right. The requisite political motion is much like that by which Harris and his wife wound their way towards the American embassy in Paris: the Irreligious Right aims towards the liberal ideal even as they draw closer and closer toward its antithesis. It may seem paradoxical to suppose that the spread of liberalism could itself be conservative, but the neoconservatives illustrate how the apparent contradiction is at least nominally resolved.

History has subjected the notion of conservatism, with which we associate the rightward political orientation, to a series of strange permutations. The conservatives that vied against the French liberals of the

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<sup>3</sup> “Head-in-the-Sand Liberals: Western civilization really is at risk from Muslim extremists,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 18, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> *BtS*, 23

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, the extent of his commitment to political matters at Town Meeting: *BtS*, 295; more on this further on.



18<sup>th</sup> century sought to conserve the traditions of the *ancien regime*, culminating in the theocratically-maintained absolute monarchy of Louis XIV and the privileges of a jealous aristocracy. But after three centuries of development, liberal thought and politics may now be said to constitute its own well-established tradition. As such, it becomes, itself, something to conserve, and it is in this regard that the Four Horsemen may be said to exemplify a conservative tendency, in much the same way that the neoconservative movement built their platform on the mission of preserving Western liberalism.

“Only when we can frame a comprehensive view of the many aspects of religion can we formulate defensible policies for how to respond to religions in the future,” says Dennett.<sup>6</sup> The first term of the phrase “Irreligious Right” is not incidentally descriptive; it is not that a certain right-leaning group just so happens to be populated by the cultured opponents of religion. Rather, it is their identification of religion, and theism in particular, as the foremost threat to the liberal tradition they hope to conserve that marks the Irreligious Right as a political unity. Atheism is not only their theological disposition: they have shaped it into a political platform. In their approach to that platform they reveal their orientation toward the right. “It is clear,” Harris writes, “that we have arrived at a period in our history where civil society, on a global scale, is not merely a nice idea; it is essential for the maintenance of civilization.”<sup>7</sup> This, in capsule form, expresses the conservative premise underlying the formation of an Irreligious Right. What it seeks to conserve is civilization as defined by the tradition of 18<sup>th</sup> century French liberalism; it seeks to conserve it specifically against the resurgence of religion. Harris can thus cite his preference for drug legalization or tax distribution as proof of his liberalism, but on the issue that exercises him most, the civil status of religion, he shows himself to be deeply conservative.

Just how conservative becomes clear in declarations like, “The people who speak most sensibly about the threat that Islam poses to Europe are actually fascists.”<sup>8</sup> He means, presumably, politicians like Geert Wilders, whose film *Fitna* Harris defends in an article entitled “Losing Our Spines to Save Our Necks.”<sup>9</sup> The article demonstrates the tenuous line Harris walks between defense of liberal values, like free speech, and their inversion. At times it can be difficult to decide whether the more crucial point is that we

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<sup>6</sup> *BtS*, 310

<sup>7</sup> *TEoF*, 150

<sup>8</sup> “Head-in-the-Sand Liberals.”

<sup>9</sup> *Huffington Post*, May 5, 2008, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/sam-harris/losing-our-spines-to-save\\_b\\_100132.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/sam-harris/losing-our-spines-to-save_b_100132.html)

should “expect politicians and journalists in every free society to strenuously defend Wilders’ right to make such a film,” or that “those who claim the ‘right not to be offended,’” like European Muslims responding to *Fitna*, “have also announced their hatred of civil society.” Meanwhile, Wilders’ far-right “Freedom Party” recently triumphed in Dutch elections to become the third most powerful party in the nation, largely on a platform that calls for banning minarets and the Koran.<sup>10</sup> That Harris has leant moral support to the far-right advocates of censorship seems to concern him little if at all.

In view of such heavy ironies, it is tempting to read his impassioned defense of free speech as little more than a rhetorical strategy. That may be going too far, but how does one reconcile Harris’ apparently sincere attempt to identify himself as a liberal with the rightward pull of so much of what he espouses? It may be that the Irreligious Right is able to credibly maintain the appearance of centrism simply because their rhetoric has not yet grown as overtly radical as that of other contemporary conservative groups. The left/right dichotomy in politics is, after all, a matter of relative degree. The Democratic Party, though a mainstay of the political left in the United States, seems much more closely aligned with the center, or even the right, when compared to the Socialist parties of many European nations. So the question becomes, “to the right of whom?”



The political transformation of Christopher Hitchens provides a convenient starting point. Once given to Marxist-Socialist leanings, Hitchens has, in recent years, reevaluated his political commitments, even to the point of stumping for the Bush administration’s decision to invade Iraq in 2003. It might risk overstating the case to suggest that his change of heart was to some extent contingent on shifts within socialist thought itself. At the very least, it is worth pointing out that the hostility that once characterized relations between religion and Marxism no longer prevail. In his critique of New Atheism,<sup>11</sup> Marxist literary critic Terry Eagleton argued that recent religious movements, such as “liberation theology,” offer avenues toward social justice that have proven elusive for secular socialism. The New Atheists, he argues, ignore such religious moral imperatives to the detriment of their own credibility. By contrast, Hitchens rails against the “bizarre

<sup>10</sup> Cf. e.g. “Dutch voters boost far-right party of Geert Wilders,” Robert Marquand, *The Christian Science Monitor*, June 10, 2010; see also “Enough Is Enough: Ban the Koran,” Geert Wilders, *de Volkskrant*, August 8, 2007.

<sup>11</sup> *Reason, Faith and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (Yale:2009)

mutation known oxymoronically as ‘liberation theology,’ where priests and even some bishops adopted ‘alternative’ liturgies enshrining the ludicrous notion that Jesus of Nazareth was actually a dues-paying socialist.”<sup>12</sup>

One can travel far right of Marxism without leaving the left end of the political spectrum. Suggesting that not all of the Vatican’s reason for declaring liberation theology a heresy were bad does not in itself put Hitchens on the right, however much it might surprise the reader to see him suggest that there are good reasons for declaring any idea “heretical.” On that evidence alone we might even suppose that Hitchens has settled comfortably closer to the center – that is, at least, until we come to his support of the Bush administration’s war in Iraq. Critics have long taken Hitchens to task over his vocal support for that invasion, and have sometimes expressed bewilderment that once so outspoken a skeptic of conservative politics would serve as apologist for Operation Iraqi Freedom, as it was called.<sup>13</sup> That apparent contradiction dissolves once we recognize the significant overlap between the ideological assumptions of the neoconservatives on the one hand, and the Irreligious Right on the other.

“It appears,” writes Harris, “that one of the most urgent tasks we now face in the developed world is to find some way of facilitating the emergence of civil societies everywhere else.”<sup>14</sup> This accords with the ideological assumptions that underpin the more philosophical persuasion of the American neoconservative movement. A pivotal expression of that philosophical brand is Francis Fukuyama’s essay “The End of History?”<sup>15</sup> and later, his book-length elaboration, *The End of History and the Last Man*.<sup>16</sup> Fukuyama’s thesis is that the liberal democratic tradition represents the final evolution of human political thought, beyond which we may expect no further qualitative progress. Neoconservatism holds that the maintenance of the final culmination of political history depends on its spread to the remaining corners of the globe where Western liberalism has not yet firmly established itself. The invasion of Iraq was justified to a largely Democratic Congress on grounds that Iraq represented an immediate

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<sup>12</sup> GING, 247

<sup>13</sup> For examples of Hitchens’ apologetic, see eg. “Restating the Case for War: Waiting for Saddam to change is what got us into this mess in the first place,” November 5, 2003, *Slate*; “The Buried Truth: A new book shows that Saddam didn’t have nuclear weapons – yet,” October 8, 2004, *Slate*; “No Regrets: Why I’m not sorry that George W. Bush beat Al Gore and John Kerry,” January 19, 2009, *Slate*; etc. ad nauseam.

<sup>14</sup> *TEoF*, 150

<sup>15</sup> published in *The National Interest*, Summer 1989

<sup>16</sup> Free Press:1992

threat to the security of the United States, but for neoconservatives no such justification was needed. The imperative of forcibly exporting Western democracy sufficed.

There are, however, significant differences between *The End of Faith* and Fukuyama's thesis circa 1989. Harris provides one such contrast when he writes that journalist Fareed Zakaria "has persuasively argued that the transition from tyranny to liberalism is unlikely to be accomplished by plebiscite. It seems all but certain that some form of benign dictatorship will generally be necessary to bridge the gap."<sup>17</sup> The neoconservatives' prediction of a rapid embrace of democracy in Iraq seems rosy by comparison. Stark though that contrast may be, a more telling difference lies in Harris' identification of theocracy as the one major obstacle to the triumph of "civil society," as he calls it.

After a time, that philosophical gap has narrowed, with Fukuyama citing the potential for theocracy, particularly in the Middle East, to slow the final closing of the curtain on political history. And yet, Fukuyama has failed to adopt quite so hard a line as that espoused by Harris.<sup>18</sup> In light of that difference, and in light of Fukuyama's public break with his former neoconservative allies<sup>19</sup>, it is hardly surprising to find Hitchens comparing him to "a wooden Stalinist hack," amid the usual battery of barbs and stings. "The charge that used to be leveled against the neoconservatives," he writes, "was that they had wanted to get rid of Saddam Hussein (pause for significant lowering of voice) even before Sept. 11, 2001. And that 'accusation,' as Fukuyama well knows, was true – and to their credit."<sup>20</sup> It is curious to see Hitchens defending the intentions of the neoconservative Bush administration against the theorist who helped to chart their course, but then, Hitchens has long held that the brutality of Hussein's Baathist regime was reason enough to intervene in Iraq. Be that as it may, it only exonerates the neoconservatives if it can be shown that their motives were equally well grounded in the humanitarian ideal.

Fukuyama has, in fact, acknowledged the neoconservative role, writing that, "More than any other group, it was the neoconservatives both inside and outside the Bush administration who pushed for democratizing Iraq and

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<sup>17</sup> *TEoF*, 150-151

<sup>18</sup> Cp., for example, "Europe vs. Radical Islam: Alarmist Americans have mostly bad advice for Europeans," Francis Fukuyama, *Slate*, February 27, 2006.

<sup>19</sup> "After Neoconservatism," Francis Fukuyama, *The New York Times*, February 19, 2006.

<sup>20</sup> "The End of Fukuyama: Why his latest pronouncements miss the mark," *Slate*, March 1, 2006.

the broader Middle East.”<sup>21</sup> Fukuyama’s point is that the invasion was largely motivated by neoconservative ideology. It was on the premise, that illiberalism abroad was a threat to the gains made by liberalism at home, that the neoconservative think tank Project for a New American Century (PNAC) crafted a foreign policy with the end goal of promoting “American global leadership.”<sup>22</sup> That foreign policy perspective in part explains the role of U.S. neoconservatives in terraforming the political landscape in Afghanistan and Iraq. For example, a PNAC “Project Memorandum” dated 1999 declares, “it has become clear that the only solution for the threat Iraq poses is to remove Saddam.”<sup>23</sup> Fukuyama was a signatory of the PNAC Statement of Principles – as were Bush administration staffers Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld and Paul Wolfowitz, who led the charge into Iraq in part on trumped up allegations that the Baath regime had lent aid to al Qaeda and possessed biological and chemical agents that could be provided to terrorist groups for further attacks on American soil. Though in favorably comparing them to his “one-time Trotskyist comrades” Hitchens refers to only as his “temporary neocon allies,” he seems to have made the mistake of conflating their motives for deposing Hussein with his own. If he wished to stay true to the moral premises that seem to have energized his support for Operation Iraqi Freedom, it would have been more honest to say that the Bush administration did the right thing for the wrong reasons. Better yet, he could acknowledge that the costs have made it difficult to justify the invasion, even if doing so did result in the tangible good of having removed Hussein from power. So far, he has avoided such qualifications, as though to admit as much would be equivalent to surrendering the moral high ground.



There remains every reason to take Hitchens at his word when he calls such ideological alliances temporary. The neoconservatives ascended to the White House by means of a similar alliance with the Religious Right. Former President George W. Bush has always presented an ambiguous figure, and it could be argued that his political success (or usefulness, if you prefer a more cynical perspective) was grounded in his ability to credibly court his father’s neoconservatives allies on one hand, and the Religious

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<sup>21</sup> *op cit.*

<sup>22</sup> Eliot Abrams, et al., “Statement of Principles,” June 3, 1997, [newamericancentury.org](http://newamericancentury.org)

<sup>23</sup> Mark Lagon, “Project Memorandum,” January 7, 1999, [newamericancentury.org](http://newamericancentury.org)

Right on the other. The point is that, at the moment of their own ascendancy, some among the Irreligious Right found themselves in the curious position of having common cause with a group politically tied to its antithesis. It may be taken as an index of their political sympathies that elements of both the Religious and Irreligious Rights could stand in support of the same war: the former in order to conserve "Judeo-Christian values," and the latter to conserve secular liberalism. But if the Religious Right represents one polarity across the table from the Irreligious Right, so do the "religious liberals" and "religious moderates" to the left of both; so also the secular liberals criticized by Harris for their tolerance, and by Dennett for their methodology.

A soap opera quality attaches itself to this revolving door of strange bedfellows and arch-nemeses. Harris provides the most straightforward index to the uneasy alliances their political commitments entail:

Unless liberals realize that there are tens of millions of people in the Muslim world who are far scarier than Dick Cheney, they will be unable to protect civilization from its genuine enemies.

Increasingly, Americans will come to believe that the only people hard-headed enough to fight the religious lunatics of the Muslim world are the religious lunatics of the West. Indeed, it is telling that the people who speak with the greatest moral clarity about the current wars in the Middle East are members of the Christian right, whose infatuation with biblical prophecy is nearly as troubling as the ideology of our enemies. Religious dogmatism is now playing both sides of the board in a very dangerous game.<sup>24</sup>

Indeed, a deep ambivalence pervades the Irreligious Right's attitude towards the religious liberalism.

On the surface, this often resembles a straightforward divide-and-conquer tactic. In *Letter to a Christian Nation*, for example, Harris claims to "engage Christianity at its most divisive, injurious, and retrograde. In this, liberals, moderates, and nonbelievers can recognize a common cause."<sup>25</sup> That seems like a reasonable appeal, but he cedes that common ground as soon as he turns to directly address the more "divisive, injurious, and retrograde" contingent. "Here," he writes, "we need only observe that the issue is both simpler and more urgent than liberals and moderates generally admit." In brief: "If the basic tenets of Christianity are true, then there are

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<sup>24</sup> "The End of Liberalism?"

<sup>25</sup> *LtaCN*, "A Note to the Reader", ix-x.

some very grim surprises in store for nonbelievers like myself. You understand this. So let us be honest with ourselves: in the fullness of time, one side is really going to win this argument, and the other side is really going to lose.”<sup>26</sup> The criticism against those with whom he claims to have “common cause” ends up being central to the book, and he rarely passes up an opportunity to trash his presumed allies to those he considers truly dangerous. It is almost as though Harris did not expect moderates and fundamentalists to read the same parts of *Letter to a Christian Nation*.

But that represents a low ebb in the rather transparent tactic of playing one side against the other. It takes a more ominous turn when Dennett joins Harris in calling on religious moderates to oppose religious radicals. Specifically, he has public denunciation in mind. In arguing that fundamentalism represents religion at its most consistent, Harris practically demands that religious believers adhere to the most volatile demands of scripture. Dennett, on the other hand, admits that “fanatics are rarely if ever inspired by, or guided by, the deepest and best tenets in those religious traditions,” and yet the two authors find accord on the issue of religion’s responsibility for violence. To that end, Dennett argues that, “Al Qaeda and Hamas terrorism is still Islam’s responsibility, and abortion-clinic bombing is still Christianity’s responsibility, and the murderous activities of Hindu extremists are still Hinduism’s responsibility.”<sup>27</sup> It falls to those traditions to nullify the harm of the more radical elements for which they are responsible. This paves the way for the moral argument that, “Any religious person who is not actively and publicly involved in that effort is shirking a duty – and the fact that you don’t belong to a congregation or denomination that is offending doesn’t excuse you....”<sup>28</sup> Lest he has failed to make his point, he adds, “Until the priests and rabbis and imams and their flocks explicitly condemn by name the dangerous individuals and congregations within their ranks, they are all complicit.”<sup>29</sup>

By way of illustration, in the final paragraphs of *Breaking the Spell*,<sup>30</sup> we find Dennett speculating on the immanent threat of those elements of the Religious Right who believe in “the inevitability of the End Days, or the Rapture, the coming Armageddon that will separate the blessed from the damned in the final Day of Judgment.” They are, he tells us, comparable to the “‘red-diaper babies,’ children of hardline members of the Communist Party of America,” some of whom “can still be found infecting the

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<sup>26</sup> *LtaCN*, 5

<sup>27</sup> *BtS*, 299

<sup>28</sup> *BtS*, 301

<sup>29</sup> *BtS*, 301

<sup>30</sup> *BtS*, 337-339

atmosphere of political action in left-wing circles, to the extreme frustration and annoyance of honest socialists and others on the left.” Dennett admits of the End Timers that “it is hard to know how many they are.” He is thus reduced to trafficking in ominous generalities, indicative of what Richard Hofstadter called “the paranoid style.”<sup>31</sup> To that end, he poses a series of rhetorical questions: “Are their numbers growing? Apparently. Are they attempting to gain positions of power and influence in the governments of the world? Apparently. Should we all know about this phenomenon? We certainly should.” Our lack of any definite knowledge of the matter, he writes, “in itself is worrisome, and constitutes an excellent reason to conduct an objective investigation of the whole End Times movement, and particularly the possible presence of fanatical adherents in positions of power in the government and the military.”

What is most curious about the argument is that Dennett clearly is not unmindful of the obvious point of reference for this sort of inquiry. He warns that, “Since we certainly don’t want to relive McCarthyism in the twenty-first century, we should approach this task with maximal public accountability and disclosure, in a bipartisan spirit, and in the full light of public attention.” What danger Dennett hopes to sidestep with this disclaimer remains unclear. He seems to think the mere acknowledgement sufficient to dispel the specter of Inquisition and witch-hunt that attends his suggestion, as though the trouble with the House Un-American Activities Committee was simply that it was too secretive or partisan. It was neither, and the more traditional objection remains that the program of denunciation itself was bankrupt. Yet that is exactly what Dennett has called for, and by the same process of “naming names” that characterized not only the black lists of the McCarthyist period, but also the cycle of denunciations in the witch crazes and Inquisition of the Medieval and Enlightenment eras. “I suggest,” he writes,

that the political leaders who are in the best position to call for a full exposure of this disturbing trend are those whose credentials could hardly be impugned by those who are fearful of atheists or brights: the eleven senators and congressmen who are members of the ‘Family (or the ‘Fellowship Foundation’), a secretive Christian organization that has been influential in Washington, D.C., for decades.

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<sup>31</sup> “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” Richard Hofstadter, *Harper’s Magazine*, November 1964, pp. 77-86 – an immensely useful essay for understanding the dangers of the rhetoric employed by the Irreligious Right.



He has, it seems, found in the Family an organ ready-made for the task of policing religious commitments among those involved in American politics.

His caution that we should avoid McCarthyism seems laudably conscientious so long as it remains unrecognized that something like it is the logical consequence of the program he has proposed. To illustrate, consider the inverse situation: suppose that a prominent religious intellectual were to suggest that as yet uncounted atheists are “attempting to gain positions of power and influence in the governments of the world,” and that an inquiry should be established in which secularist senators and congressmen were expected to expose “this disturbing trend.” Could any fair observer fail to see how the conclusion to such a question-begging inquiry is implicit in its formulation? Is there any doubt that Dennett would be horrified, and rightly so, even were the intellectual to blithely assure him that the intent were merely to allow the public to make “informed choices about their lives?” Surely he would see the political implications. Apart from the difficulties entailed by his own dictum that religious belief is practically indistinguishable from mere profession of belief,<sup>32</sup> that sort of political theater encourages the conversion of its findings into political epithets. Once the idea of an ideologically-driven coup takes hold, the mere suggestion that a political figure is a “red,” or a “Muslim,” or a “closet atheist” may be used to damage their reputation and undermine their standing.

These are possibilities that cannot easily be protected against once a society wanders down that path. Indeed, since 2008, the presidency of Barack Obama has been continually dogged by the tenacious rumor that he is a crypto-Muslim, against every indication that he is, in fact, a practicing Christian. To add to that confusion, some atheists have suggested that he is, to the contrary, a closet atheist, who has hidden his unbelief in order to remain politically viable in a constituency that is favorably disposed toward religious candidates, and Protestant Christians in particular. It is, perhaps, just as well for the President that rumors of his atheism have, so far, failed to gain traction in the public at large, but the fact that those who oppose him have chosen instead to believe that he is Muslim may suggest a shift in social attitudes. It seems likely that, so far as the presidency is concerned, atheists are no longer the least electable ideological persuasion. That would be better news for American atheists, both on the Irreligious Right and otherwise, if it had it been due to an improvement in popular perceptions about atheism, rather than by the spread of paranoia over the motives of Muslim Americans.

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<sup>32</sup> See “The Diagnostics of Belief” for the elaboration of that theme.

If the fact that such rumors can be leveraged in order to obstruct the normal business of the presidency did not already indicate the extent to which the paranoid style is operative in the contemporary political environment, a string of controversies in this year's mid-term elections suggest that the strategy of questioning a candidate's religious commitments has only grown more widespread. In Delaware, for example, candidate Christine O'Donnell felt compelled to air commercials denying that she practiced Wicca; opponents of Texas legislator Joe Straus have stressed his Judaism in attempt to weaken his bid for reelection as speaker of the House of Representatives; and South Carolina candidate for governor Nikki Haley fended off accusations that her professed Christianity was, in fact, a cover for Sikhism, even enduring the confused slur of a senator who called her a "raghead."<sup>33</sup> Mitt Romney, who lost the Republican primary to John McCain in 2008, remains a perennial subject of speculation about the 2012 presidential election, but rarely without the suggestion that his Mormonism renders him unelectable – at present, Baptist minister Mike Huckabee is a front-runner for the Republican nomination. Very little, it seems, stands between Dennett and his hope that a widespread program of the denunciation will become *de rigeur* for the American political process, save the inclusion of Christian politicians in the web of suspicion.

Even had he not already unambiguously declared End Timers "dangerous," ready to "betray our democracy in pursuit of their religious agendas," the suggestion that informed choice is impossible without some such naming of names presupposes what the newly informed citizen ought to do with what they have learned. The ceremony of a formal investigation imparts its own weight to the outcome. To be outed as an atheist or End Timer implies a stigma of guilt, regardless of whether or not the person's belief, or lack thereof, has any real impact on their ability to govern equitably. Denunciation thus becomes a kind of shibboleth, a profession of solidarity, tempting those who want to appear moderate or loyal to the secular status quo to denounce others, whether or not the denunciations are warranted. If a religious congregation or leader fails to denounce when it is expected of them, they run the risk of being seen as complicit, whether or

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<sup>33</sup> See e.g.: "Crying Witch: Learning from the O'Donnell 'Dabbling' Debacle," Spencer Dew, *Religion Dispatches*, October 28, 2010; "In Jesus' name?" *Houston Chronicle*, November 20, 2010; "Nikki Haley and Acceptable Racism," David A. Graham, *Newsweek*, June 4, 2010. All three candidates were running as Republicans, two with backing from the still nascent Tea Party, and the denunciations were largely voiced by opponents within the G.O.P, suggesting that the strategy still belongs largely to the conservative elements in the U.S.

not they are. And if they are seen as complicit, then other religious groups will be expected to denounce them. Dennett seems intent on shaming the Family into starting just such a cycle of denunciation when he lists all eleven of them by name. From his earlier arguments, it follows not only that they would be better positioned to effectively root out eschatological elements within the government and military: to refuse would be shirking a moral and political duty.

How that duty devolves to them proves a bit mystifying. Dawkins, as seen elsewhere,<sup>34</sup> argues that religion is responsible for conflict because it is uniquely capable of providing the identity distinctions that make it possible to draw the lines of conflict; Harris writes that, “moderates are, in large part, responsible for the conflict in our world, because their beliefs provide the context in which scriptural literalism and religious violence can never be adequately opposed.”<sup>35</sup> Yet it seems doubtful that any of the Horsemen would hold the secular doctrines of democracy responsible for the providing the context that made, say, the excesses of the Vietnam War possible. For his part, Dennett builds his case for that responsibility by analogy to the legal status of swimming pools as “attractive nuisances.”<sup>36</sup> Just as swimming pool owners “are under a duty to post a warning or take stronger affirmative action to protect children from the dangers of that attraction,” responsibility for religious fanatics ought to rest with the memetic stewards “who maintain religions, and take steps to make them attractive.”<sup>37</sup>

The analogy is dubious. For one thing, the attribution of responsibility is much more precise in the case of the swimming pool owner: one pool owner is not responsible for the attractive nuisance presented by his neighbor’s pool. It is difficult to see how it could be the duty of Amish clergy, living in near total isolation in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, to publicly condemn the excesses of Christian Serbs involved in the atrocities of the former Yugoslavia, particularly if, as Dennett himself points out, those atrocities may have been motivated by political allegiances the two groups do not share. Nor is it clear that he would apply the same principle with respect to other groups. Merely by virtue of sharing the same vocation, was Jonas Salk, pioneer of the polio vaccine, responsible for Joseph Mengele, who took an appointment at Auschwitz to experiment on unwilling human victims? Where the engineers of American democracy complicit when Germany democracy enabled the political rise of National Socialism? Such broad dispensation makes a mockery of the notion of social responsibility,

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<sup>34</sup> “A Drawing of Lines”

<sup>35</sup> *TEoF*, 45

<sup>36</sup> *BtS*, 298

<sup>37</sup> *BtS*, 299

but that is just the scope suggested by the Irreligious Right's treatment of institutional responsibility when it comes to religion.

Those are logical and ethical technicalities, but with respect to the politics of the Irreligious Right, the more serious point lies simply in the fact that, in having assigned responsibility, they are attempting to bring moral suasion to bear. It may put readers of Hitchens' *Why Orwell Matters* in mind of the story of Pavlik Morozov, a Soviet folk hero and "14-year old 'Pioneer' who had turned in his family to the Soviet police for the offense of hoarding grain."<sup>38</sup> He was martyred shortly thereafter, and made into an example of Party loyalty. Dennett, who made the unreliability of professing belief a central theme of *Breaking the Spell*, ought to have seen the difficulties that ethic entailed. By making denunciation a duty he promotes his own version of "belief in belief." But even short of recognizing that contradiction, he ought to have seen the historical tendency of the "responsibility" to denounce to go insistently awry. If we are to avoid the conclusion that he is simply willing (if not eager) to risk that pass, it may be necessary to assume that he has been lulled into a false sense of security, either by relative unfamiliarity with the ample examples afforded by history, or by pure political naivete.

The latter explanation is suggested by a passage in *Breaking the Spell*, in which Dennett attempts to draw a distinction between his own delegation of responsibility in political matters, and the believer's delegation of moral responsibility to religious tradition or institutions. "When my wife and I go to Town Meeting," he writes,

I know that she has studied the issues that confront our town so much more assiduously than I have that I routinely follow her lead, voting the way she tells me to vote, even if I'm not sure just why, because I have plenty of evidence for my conviction that if we did take the time and energy to thrash it all out she'd persuade me that, all things considered, her opinion was correct.<sup>39</sup>

This is an astonishing passage, both for its candor and for the glaring philosophical contradiction it entails, coming as it does from an author who has praised the virtues of democracy, intellectual honesty and informed choice. Rhetorically, he asks, "Is this a dereliction of my duties as a citizen?" Whereas he summarily concludes that it is not, I would go further

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<sup>38</sup> *Why Orwell Matters*, 158

<sup>39</sup> *BtS*, 295

and say that, more than mere dereliction, it is the corruption of the political ideal that he lists among his own "sacred values."<sup>40</sup>

In a democratic society, the vote allows each citizen equal influence, at least in principle, over the policies by which they are governed. Simply defaulting on that right would, however wastefully, do little more than render Dennett's potential vote politically neutral. But by slavishly voting in line with his wife, he has essentially doubled *her* voting power, undermining the principle of equality intrinsic to the promise of "one person, one vote." If he feels so little vested in the issues, that he cannot be bothered to come to his own informed opinion on them, it would be more philosophically consistent to altogether abstain from casting a vote. The premise that her vote *is* equivalent to his vote, had he cared enough to inform himself on the issue, is based on an induction of dubious validity, namely the premise that, since she has always convinced him in the past, there is little chance of them ever disagreeing on a political issue. That premise is, of course, impossible to test so long as he continues to play follow-the-leader in political matters. Ultimately, these objections can be boiled down to the proposition that, if he is truly committed to the ideals of democracy and equality, we should expect to see put more care in their exercise. Perhaps the best we can say is that he *professes* belief in those ideals; his political dereliction makes it impossible to say with any certainty that he truly believes them.

That Dennett's compatriots have done so little to counter his policy recommendations suggests the same failure that all Four Horsemen have criticized in religious groups. If, for example, Dawkins disagrees with his position, why does he hesitate to issue his criticisms "from the pulpit," so to speak? It may be because he actually agrees with Dennett, but to borrow Dennett's own explanation with respect to "an eminent Episcopal cleric," it may also be that Dawkins "doesn't want to let down the side."<sup>41</sup> Likewise, given Dennett's assertion that science "doesn't provide or establish the values that our ethical judgments and arguments are based on,"<sup>42</sup> it would be interesting to know his opinion regarding the claims made in *The Moral Landscape*. So far, his pronouncements concerning Harris' thesis have taken place entirely behind closed doors, and I am at least cynical enough to expect little in the way of overt public disagreement. This relative accord, even in the face of differences of opinion on central matters, suggests that a secular version of Dennett's belief in belief may be operative within the Irreligious Right itself. Hitchens, more than any of the others, has shown

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<sup>40</sup> *BtS*, 24

<sup>41</sup> *BtS*, 209-210

<sup>42</sup> *BtS*, 376

himself willing to part ways with his fellow Horsemen, and for that, much credit is due. But it would be going too far to suggest that any of the Four are somehow responsible for Dennett's policy recommendations, or shirking a moral duty by their failure to denounce him by name.



The emphasis so far has been on what could be called political theater, but there are civil implications as well. "The principle is unassailable," writes Dennett: "we others have no right to intrude on their private practices *so long as we can be quite sure that they are not injuring others*. But it is getting harder and harder to be sure about when this is the case."<sup>43</sup> This, like Harris' controversial claim that belief is so intimately tied to action that it would be reasonable to treat some beliefs as a declaration of intent to act, constitutes the initial link in a chain of thought that ends with the abrogation of the right to believe according to one's own rights of conscience.<sup>44</sup>

In fact, a distinct vein of paternalism may discerned throughout *Breaking the Spell* and *God Is Not Great*, as well as in the moral scheme suggested by *The Moral Landscape* and in the final chapters of *The God Delusion*.<sup>45</sup> Dawkins supposes the imaginary friends of children "a good model for understanding theistic beliefs in adults," going so far to suggest that the religions may "have evolved originally by the postponement, over generations, of the moment in life when children gave up their binkers," as he calls them.<sup>46</sup> As far as he is concerned, pedomorphosis, "the retention into adulthood of childhood characteristics," is indicative of the religious mind. Similarly, Hitchens writes that religion "comes from the bawling and fearful infancy of our species, and is a babyish attempt to meet our inescapable demand for knowledge."<sup>47</sup> This recalls not only the stages of social history proposed by the Progressives of the Enlightenment, but also Freud's pseudo-psychological critique of religion. Dennett compares religious believers to drunks, drug addicts, isolated stone-age cultures, robotic slaves. "They all need all the help they can get,"<sup>48</sup> he writes,

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<sup>43</sup> *BtS*, 13-14

<sup>44</sup> On Harris' principle, see "The Diagnostics of Belief"; on rights of conscience, "The Heirs of *La Coterie Holbachique*."

<sup>45</sup> Esp. *TGD*, 389-394

<sup>46</sup> The reference is to a poem by A. A. Milne.

<sup>47</sup> *GING*, 64

<sup>48</sup> *BtS*, 13

insisting that “we cannot maintain our childhood innocence forever. It is time for us all to grow up.”<sup>49</sup>

It may not have passed notice that, if those who “maintain religions” and “make them more attractive” are the swimming pool owners in Dennett’s analogy, then it follows that the religious fanatics for whom they are responsible are the children lured into the attractive nuisance of religion. That infantilization accords neatly with what he supposes to be “perhaps the most shocking implication” of his argument, namely that “those who have an unquestioning faith in the correctness of the moral teachings of their religion [...] are in fact taking a personally immoral stand.”<sup>50</sup> They have, on his account, delegated responsibility for moral behavior to the religious authority. It would be quite enough (and more) to say that, in doing so, they “should be seen to be making it impossible for the rest of us to take their views seriously, excusing themselves from the moral conversation, inadvertently acknowledging that their own views are not conscientiously maintained and deserve no further hearing.”<sup>51</sup> That in itself is a stance with grave political implications, but by no means the most stark implied by the passage. “Suppose you believe that stem-cell research is wrong because that is what God told you,” he writes.

Even if you are right – that is, even if God does indeed exist and has, personally, told you that stem-cell research is wrong – you cannot reasonably expect others who do not share your faith or experience to accept this as a reason. You are being unreasonable in taking your stand. The fact that your faith is so strong that you cannot do otherwise just shows (if you really can’t) that you are disabled for moral persuasion, a sort of robotic slave to a meme that you are unable to evaluate.<sup>52</sup>

The scenario plays like a Kafka story. The person in it is objectively right, but because she cannot be persuaded to affirm the wrong answer, she cedes all responsibility into the hands of those who oppose her. Dennett leaves virtually no recourse, except, ironically, that of false profession. Say that up is down, and you will, so far as your interlocutor is concerned, have demonstrated your capacity for moral persuasion. If Dennett is bothered by that consequence of his argument, he gives no indication of it.

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<sup>49</sup> *BtS*, 334

<sup>50</sup> *BtS*, 295

<sup>51</sup> *BtS*, 296

<sup>52</sup> *BtS*, 296

The dehumanization and denial of agency that comes at the end of that passage truly is shocking, or at least ought to be. It seems contrived to suggest that it would be permissible, perhaps even morally obligatory, to intervene in decisions that any other competent agent would be allowed to make as a matter of course, simply because the person making them espouses religious beliefs. In a context that we shall consider in a moment, Dennett argues that we, as a society,

take ourselves to be sometimes permitted, and even obligated, to make such conscientious decisions on behalf of people who cannot, for one reason or another, make an informed decision for themselves, and this set of problems can be addressed using the understanding that we have already hammered out in the workshop of political consensus on these other topics.<sup>53</sup>

More than a mere analogy, this amounts to the establishment of a principle by which it becomes possible to assert authority over the individual's rights of conscience.

I have looked in vain for some underlying principle that would explain *Breaking the Spell's* variable treatment of the subject of responsibility. At one point Dennett argues by analogy, pointing out that,

We used to regard drunks as somewhat diminished in their responsibility for their actions – they were too drunk to know what they were doing, after all – but we now see them, and the bartenders who serve them, as fully responsible. We need to spread the word that religious intoxication is no excuse either.<sup>54</sup>

Presumably the bartender plays the same role that the swimming pool owner plays in the “attractive nuisance” analogy, but in the latter the steward of religious tradition shoulders the greater responsibility. The implication that those lured in by the attractive nuisance lack responsibility for their own actions is made more explicit in Dennett's “most shocking implication,” that those who see religious moral claims as non-negotiable are “disabled for moral persuasion.” This suggests the sort of psychological pathology legally recognized as a pretext for depriving a defendant their full liberty. Other religious believers have an inherent duty to denounce anyone whose actions paint them as “slave to a meme”, even though we can have

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<sup>53</sup> *BtS*, 324

<sup>54</sup> *BtS*, 285



no confidence in such professions. It is total moral dereliction to cede responsibility to a religious tradition or leader, but not a similar dereliction of duty to informally delegate responsibility for political deliberation to one's wife. The confusion seems almost terminal.

As it turns out, there is a way to render those variations consistent with one another, but the solution proves rather unkind to Dennett. The apparent contradictions disappear if we simply assume that, in allocating or denying responsibility to the religious believer, he has, in each case, chosen whichever is most prejudicial against religion. Thus the religious believer bears the greatest responsibility when called upon to answer for the evils perpetrated by her coreligionists, no matter how remote, and is capable of the least responsibility when standing on religious principle, no matter how correct.

The infantilization of religious belief common to at least three of the Four Horsemen; Harris' insistence that belief be taken as action *in potentia*; Dennett's suggestion that there are mitigating circumstances that complicate the otherwise "unassailable" principle of non-interference; his variable attitude towards personal responsibility – the fabric made of these threads seems, to me, inevitably paternalistic, if not downright authoritarian. The characteristic task of the rhetoric of the Irreligious Right is to provide the philosophical foundation for policies contrived to disabuse religious adherents of their theism, either for their own good (as in the paternalistic scheme), or for the survival of civilization (as in the apocalyptic). Whether it takes the form of Dennett's faintly condescending "central policy recommendation" that "we gently, firmly educate the people of the world, so that they can make truly informed choices about their lives,"<sup>55</sup> or in Harris' more frank and appalling repudiation of any "freedom of belief"<sup>56</sup> and opposition to "the ideal of religious toleration,"<sup>57</sup> all four authors share in the work. So long as it remains restricted to a relatively small and politically remote group of like-minded polemicists, that imperative remains merely worrisome. Were it to take hold on a grand scale, the inevitable result would be policies, like those suggested by Dennett, that undermine the entire structure of the very political system the Irreligious Right presume to save from religion.

Their stance on compulsory education provides the clearest illustration of the potential for authoritarianism. Indeed, a concern for what is being taught in school is common to all Four Horsemen, and central to both *Breaking the Spell* and *The God Delusion*. Unsurprisingly, all Four make stands against

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<sup>55</sup> *BtS*, 339

<sup>56</sup> *TEoF*, *inter alia*, but esp. 51 and 77.

<sup>57</sup> *TEoF*, 15

challenges to the teaching of evolution in U.S. schools, but they are not satisfied with a defensive posture. Indeed, for Dawkins that may count as offense, since he regards evolutionary education a “consciousness-raiser,” intrinsically hostile to theism. Among the three failures Harris lists as the motive forces behind *Letter to a Christian Nation*, the second is “the failure of our schools to announce the death of God in a way that each generation can understand.”<sup>58</sup> He puts a finer point on it when he writes, “I pray that we may one day think clearly enough about these matters to render our children incapable of killing themselves over their books.”<sup>59</sup> The consequence of failing to do so, he makes clear, is the annihilation of the species. The apocalyptic note rings so loudly in his “prayer” that he seems oblivious to the ominous overtones in a phrase like “render our children incapable.” His treatment of the subject suggests an endorsement of the sort of indoctrination that characterized the Albanian school system under Enver Hoxha.

Dennett presents a softer vision, but the intention seems much the same. “Let’s get *more* education about religion into our schools, not less,” he writes.

We should teach our children the creeds and customs, prohibitions and rituals, texts and music, and when we cover the history of religion, we should include both the positive – the role of churches and in the civil-rights movement of the 1960s, the flourishing of science and the arts in early Islam, and the role of the Black Muslims in bringing hope, honor and self-respect to the otherwise shattered lives of many inmates in our prisons, for instance – and the negative – the Inquisition, anti-Semitism over the ages, the role of the Catholic Church in spreading AIDS in Africa through its opposition to condoms. No religion should be favored, and none ignored.<sup>60</sup>

This may seem generously ecumenical, but is complicated by reading it in light of Dennett’s other prescriptions. Given the sheer enormity of the topic – there are hundreds of distinct religious traditions, each with complicated histories, doctrines and liturgies – the first stumbling block is strictly practical. How is it even possible to teach religion to that sort of depth without either omitting some (thus favoring others), pushing other subjects

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<sup>58</sup> *LtaCN*, 91

<sup>59</sup> *TEoF*, 49

<sup>60</sup> *BtS*, 327

out of the curriculum, or excessively burdening already heavily taxed students?

But the far more crucial issue is the one that he himself raises, that of indoctrination. For Constitutional reasons, the United States has traditionally shied away from any impulse to provide a “mandated curriculum” for religious studies. Nearly every level of such a project, from the decision of whom would write the curriculum, to its implementation in the classroom, exposes the government to the possibility (or, I would argue, likelihood) of endorsement, contradicting the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment. Dennett never pauses to acknowledge those difficulties. His “mandated curriculum” thus never leaves the realm of utopian speculation, where it is meant to serve as the antidote to the religious influence of parents. “No child has a right to freedom from indoctrination,” he writes. “Shouldn’t we change that?” He is, it turns out, building toward parody: “What, and let *outsiders* have a say in how I raise *my* child.”<sup>61</sup> But to the extent that his solution evades charges of merely substituting one form of indoctrination for another, it does so precisely because it remains strictly ideal. Any real implementation of such a plan would almost immediately expose its own internal contradiction.

By contrast, Dawkins – following the Darwinian psychologist Nicholas Humphrey<sup>62</sup> – argues that, “as long as children are young, vulnerable and in need of protection, truly moral guardianship shows itself in an honest attempt to second-guess what they *would* choose for themselves if they were old enough to do so.”<sup>63</sup> This echoes Dennett’s discussion of the importance of informed choice, but goes a step further by suggesting that “moral guardianship” is justified in making the choice on the child’s behalf. Given the suggestion that religious belief is itself the retention of childhood characteristics into adulthood, little imagination is required to convert his conception of “truly moral guardianship” into the kind of justification Dennett gives for intervening in the decisions of religious adults.

Harris echoes that theme when he argues, despite evidence to the contrary, that Islamist suicide bombers would be unwilling to kill themselves did they not believe seventy-two virgins await each martyr in Paradise. Dennett encompasses both principles when he argues that,

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<sup>61</sup> *BtS*, 326

<sup>62</sup> “What Shall We Tell the Children?” Amnesty Lecture, Oxford, Feb. 21, 1997; Humphrey’s express purpose, tactfully left unquoted by Dawkins, is, “To argue, in short, in favor of censorship, against freedom of expression, and to do so moreover in an area of life that has traditionally been regarded as sacrosanct,” that of “moral and religious education.”

<sup>63</sup> *TGD*, 367

"Instead of trying to destroy the madrassahs that close the minds of thousands of young Muslim boys, we should create alternative schools – for Muslim boys *and girls* – that will better serve their real and pressing needs, and let those schools compete openly with the madrassahs for clientele."<sup>64</sup> Earlier he argued that, "We shouldn't assume, while worrying over the likely effects, that the seductions of Western culture will automatically swamp all the fragile treasures of other cultures,"<sup>65</sup> but here his suggestion seems calculated to do just that, by striking at the educational foundations of those cultures. Doing so, he predicts, will prevent them from choosing martyrdom in the future.

It is interesting that, on this issue, Harris and Dennett part ways over matters of fact. Having read and quoted *The End of Faith*, Dennett must surely be acquainted with the fact that many of the key figures of Islamist terrorism were, in fact, educated in the Western schools and universities. Perhaps his point is that Western educators have simply failed to reach them early enough. Nor is there any less tension between his claim that, "in every place where terrorism has blossomed, those it has attracted are almost all young men who have learned enough about the world to see that their futures look otherwise bleak and uninspiring,"<sup>66</sup> and Harris pre-emptive rejoinder that, "Muslim terrorists have not tended to come from the ranks of the uneducated poor; many have been middle class, educated, and without any obvious dysfunction in their personal lives."<sup>67</sup> At the very least, the apparent breach between their interpretations draws into question Dennett's confidence in putting forward the case of terrorism as a demonstration of how we can cut through "so many complexities, so many variables [...] to make predictions we can act on."

Both Dawkins and, at times, Dennett write as though substituting a formal education about religion for parental influence would naturally produce a functionally neutral environment. Presumably children would thus be free to choose or decline religion of their own prerogative. Dennett's mandate for an exhaustive course in comparative religion even aims at transforming compulsory education into a rational "free market of religious choice." There are hints, however, that even the authors themselves do not believe they are truly leveling the playing field. "Let children learn about different faiths," Dawkins declares, "let them notice their incompatibility, and let them draw their own conclusions about the consequences of that

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<sup>64</sup> *BtS*, 335

<sup>65</sup> *BtS*, 327

<sup>66</sup> *BtS*, 333

<sup>67</sup> *TEoF*, 133

incompatibility.”<sup>68</sup> What conclusion they shall draw he seems to treat as a foregone conclusion when he speculates (as all the Horsemen do) that higher education inclines students towards atheism. In order to discourage religious belief, a curriculum need not teach, as the Soviets reportedly did, that modern science has searched the cosmos and firmly established the non-existence of God. It may be sufficient to simply isolate students from any instruction vested with belief, then teach the subject as though it were dead letter.

The principle of moral guardianship favored by Dawkins seems to justify that approach on the pretense that children would naturally choose irreligion were they already privy to the information adults like Dawkins possess. When they do not, the only possible explanation is that they have been indoctrinated with the wrong information. Discussing *Wisconsin v. Yoder* – the Supreme Court case which established the right of Amish parents to withdraw their children from high school – he argues that, “Even if the children had been asked and had expressed a preference for the Amish religion, can we suppose that they would have done so if they had been educated and informed about the available alternatives?”<sup>69</sup> By such rationalizations, he is attempting, in a sense, to draft a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Hitchens stops short of outlining educational reforms, but does suggest that, “If religious instruction were not allowed until the child had attained the age of reason, we would be living in quite a different world.”<sup>70</sup> Perhaps so, but the argument against indoctrination should not need the promise of a world without religion to make its case. It should be enough to say that a person will be better empowered to actually *choose* religion if her ability to eschew it is less constrained by childhood indoctrination. In *God Is Not Great*, it would seem, personal volition is not justification enough; the appeal of facilitating a more genuinely volitional approach to religious identity stems rather from Hitchens’ wager that doing so will mean that fewer choose religion at all.

In making that wager, the Horsemen’s hope is that we will profit by a world less torn by religious conflict and less shaped by religious moralism. And so long as they frame their argument as a means of preemptively circumventing the loss of innocent lives, the reader may incline towards their position. Likewise, Humphrey and Dawkins give the argument for moral guardianship an air of unquestioned reasonableness by the example they use to illustrate the principle, that of a young Incan girl sacrificed to

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<sup>68</sup> *TGD*, 383

<sup>69</sup> *TGD*, 371

<sup>70</sup> *GING*, 220

the sun-god. Surely, we are meant to think, no one would choose to die for so uncertain a belief if they understood the extent to which it was, objectively speaking, uncertain.

Yet, there is an element of bait-and-switch to the argument. The principle is established with respect to cases of mortal peril – the young Incan sacrifice, young male suicide bombers, and so on – then brought to bear on the educational system at large, even where the connection between religious education and mortal peril is dubious at best. Even if we grant that it is objectively wrong to indoctrinate a child to seek or submit to their own self-destruction, we may still find reason to limit the principle to those fatal extremes. It does not follow, as Humphrey and Dawkins suggest, that we should also look to restrict the moral and religious education preferred by the Amish, who are not known to breed suicide terrorists or human sacrifices. Nor need we fall back on appeals to cultural diversity or relativism in order to justify our skepticism of the principle. We need only recognize that no education takes place in a vacuum, immunized from the biases of the person who writes the curriculum.

Dawkins has written at length on the dangers of indoctrination and of labeling children according to their parents' religious affiliations,<sup>71</sup> almost always framing the discussion in terms of child abuse. Hitchens follows suit, devoting an entire chapter to the question, "Is Religion Child Abuse?" Those terms have inevitable political connotations, since accusations of child abuse can be made to serve as a potentially volatile pretext for state intervention. Dawkins asks, for example, "isn't it always a form of child abuse to label children as possessors of beliefs that they are too young to have thought about?" Asked about the accusations of sexual abuse in Dublin's religiously-administered school system, he replies that, "horrible as the sexual abuse no doubt was, the damage was arguably less than the long-term psychological damage inflicted by bringing the child up Catholic in the first place." Reprising the theme, he argues "that the phrase 'child abuse' is no exaggeration when used to describe what teachers and priests are doing to children whom they encourage to believe in something like the punishment of unshriven mortal sins in an eternal hell."

This raises a multitude of practical issues that Dawkins can hardly be bothered to address. He gives the example of eternal damnation as an example of abusive indoctrination, but is all religious indoctrination abusive? Would it also qualify as child abuse to teach a child a belief that may have much the same epistemic standing as the Catholic doctrine of damnation, but which seems much less likely to traumatize – e.g. that good deeds improve one's karma? His consideration of the Amish seems to

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<sup>71</sup> *TGD*, Ch. 9

suggest that a religious belief need not have any demonstrable psychological harm in order to qualify. So is it the epistemic standing of the belief, or its potential impact on the child, that makes a teaching abusive? Could it, for example, be considered abusive to teach a young child about the Holocaust, the inevitability of death, or the role of social Darwinism in 20<sup>th</sup> century American political discourse, on the principle that they will be traumatized by familiarity with the facts of history and biology? Or is it only abusive when a purportedly objective critic like Dawkins considers the teaching patently false?

If we consent to call indoctrination a form of child abuse, then all of those technicalities become even more pressing in light of the question, what should be done about it? When an adult is physically abusive to a child, the typical response is to remove the child from their custody, and perhaps to stigmatize the adult and ensure that their access to other children is limited, as well. If the psychological abuse of “bringing the child up Catholic” is comparable to, or even worse than, sexual and physical abuse, how could we as a society countenance any smaller penalty for the one abuse than for the other? Should we thus expect the State to take custody of any child whose parents have taught her the doctrine of Original Sin, or reincarnation, or the Ten Commandments, as with a child whose parents arbitrarily beat or exploit their children?

To be clear, it does not seem to me that Dawkins intentionally advocates any such policy. Rather, what he seems to have in mind is something akin to a magically spontaneous, society-wide change of heart, without the need for coercion. If so, then he has been naïve about the effect of introducing the term child abuse, and about the radical change in the legal and political status of family that it makes all but logically binding. In forging their educational policy recommendations, Dawkins and Dennett both attack the parents’ standing as steward of the child. From the viewpoint of the institutional traditions of the United States, this represents a shift towards state paternalism. I am not entirely convinced that the Irreligious Right would shy from that interpretation.

Here we see the authoritarian impulse take shape. Both Dennett and Dawkins have leveled arguments against the principle of the parents’ right to guardianship over the child; both have provided principles whereby the State could be empowered to take exclusive control of a child’s religious education. If they have not acknowledged the potential for abuse of authority, it may be because abuse of authority is precisely what they have in mind. All Four Horsemen, in fact, have provided rationales for using compulsory education to target certain religious doctrines (perhaps religion *in toto*) to make them untenable – Dawkins in terms of “consciousness-

raising,”<sup>72</sup> Dennett with his talk of “toxic memes,”<sup>73</sup> Hitchens as opposition to religious authoritarianism, and Harris in the frankest terms of all. It does not tax the imagination to see how all of this could be taken to suggest a program of compulsory education for the specific purpose of indoctrinating children *against* religion. Legally prevent parents from sharing their religious beliefs with their children; mandate that all children undergo a course of religious instruction calculated to neutralize any latent inclination toward religious belief. Here we see the dangerous tendency of the Irreligious Right distilled to its essence. Through much of what the Horsemen have written, the suggestion that we should be willing to engineer society, or government, or future generations such that they simply have no choice but to reject religion, hovers just below the surface.



In presenting the case for considering the Four Horsemen representative of an Irreligious Right, I have by and large argued as though it were *a priori* clear that they were aware of the logical consequences of the positions they have taken. That is, perhaps, ungenerous, since it assumes that they would, if asked directly, affirm the need for some highly illiberal policies, despite their insistence that they ultimately seek the preservation of liberal society – policies such as the use of compulsory education to indoctrinate children against religion; the direct and deliberate disruption of national sovereignty in other regions of the world, not only through the political, commercial and educational methods of globalism, but through unprovoked military intervention and the installation of despotic regimes; programs of denunciation and the implementation of propaganda campaigns; and state paternalism on the pretense that religious affiliation indicates an incapacity for genuine moral agency. “Some propositions are so dangerous,” Harris asserts, “that it may even be ethical to kill people for believing them.”<sup>74</sup> It is difficult to imagine a political disposition more dangerous than one that affirms so tyrannical a principle.

But we may save the Four Horsemen from those charges by opting for another interpretation, in its own way ungenerous. It is possible that they simply have not consciously connected the dots and seen the political picture that arises. To a diligent reader it may seem almost arithmetically plain what policy is suggested when you add together the premises that, first of all, religious indoctrination is more damaging to a child than sexual

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<sup>72</sup> TGD, 379-383

<sup>73</sup> BtS, 328-333

<sup>74</sup> TEoF, 52-53



abuse; secondly, that state intervention is justified in cases of abuse; thirdly, decisions should be made on behalf of children by second guessing what they would choose for themselves were it possible for them to be fully appraised of the relevant facts; and finally, some forms of education (e.g. evolutionary biology) are “consciousness-raisers” that make religious belief untenable. If these premises are accepted at face value, the course of action seems logically binding. And yet, Dawkins may have failed to notice that he had, in essence, provided a formula for state-sponsored atheism. If the question of whether or not he would support such a program were put to him directly, he might well be horrified by the mere suggestion.

To the extent that we, too, are horrified by the logical consequences of their arguments, it may seem an only moderately backhanded brand of kindness to suppose that shortsightedness prevented them from seeing the import of the positions they have espoused. To suppose that they grasped those consequences prior to the publication of their books is to credit them with an authoritarian and conservative impulse that they have not explicitly claimed for themselves. And yet, if Harris is right about the logical consequences of belief, or Dennett about the dangers of engineering toxic memes,<sup>75</sup> it may matter little whether or not the Horsemen would endorse the ends to which their positions tend.

“Since my proto-theory is not yet established and may prove to be wrong,” writes Dennett in the last chapter of *Breaking the Spell*, “it shouldn’t be used yet to guide our policies.”<sup>76</sup> Yet he cannot resist the temptation. Though he professes to counsel patience, he raises the specter of apocalypse in the very next sentence:

The current situation is scary – one religious fanaticism or another could produce a global catastrophe, after all – but we should resist rash “remedies” and other overreactions. It is possible, however to discuss *options* today, and to think *hypothetically* of what the sound policies *would be* if something like my account of religion is correct.<sup>77</sup>

He continues by assailing the epistemic status of religion as “*not even a theory*.” This is baroque and pointed rhetoric: despite protesting loudly against any temptation to begin putting into practice policies based on his theories, Dennett nevertheless presents the sort of policy that would be “defensible” on those assumptions, and argues for its urgency, while

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<sup>75</sup> Cf. “The Diagnostics of Belief.”

<sup>76</sup> *BtS*, 310

<sup>77</sup> *BtS*, 311

simultaneously presenting the religious position as wholly and literally indefensible. Surely Dennett is not so cloistered in the white tower of academia as to be unaware how rarely populations await firm confirmation of a theory before settling on policy. A cynic might suppose that he has issued his cautions to cover himself against the charge of radicalism while nevertheless suggesting the political path he prefers, in hopes that it will be taken up, posthaste. Taking his arguments seriously almost seems to necessitate it; otherwise, we are left with the difficulty of explaining why he would so urgently sketch a roadmap that he himself cautions is both gratuitous and potentially disastrous.

## **EPILOGUE: FAILURES (AND THE FUTURE) OF RELIGIOUS CRITIQUE**

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AT THE BEGINNING OF THESE ESSAYS, it was suggested that the most dangerous thing we can do to the arguments of the Irreligious Right is take them seriously. With each essay I have endeavored to consider on their own merits the major themes presented by the books of the Four Horsemen, but even that would have been impossible had we not begun from two assumptions that are worth stating now. The first concerns the validity of atheism, which should be taken as granted. Indeed, I cannot see how true theism can be possible without at least the possibility of a conscientious alternative in the form of disbelief, so in the last resort it can be argued that personal atheism is at least as defensible as personal theism. The objections that have been made in this collection have been directed not at the atheism of those who espoused such arguments, but rather at the web of philosophical, political and social positions that have clustered around that central disbelief. They are, then, consequentialist rather than essentialist objections, and it is partly in the hope of maintaining the possibility of a socially constructive, rather than destructive, atheist community that they have been brought to bear. The rumor of a zero-sum conflict between religious believers and secular unbelievers works against not only the fundamentalists that Harris paints as the truest of religious believers, but also against unbelievers who seek only to exercise the rights of conscience that Harris' polemic denies.

It has been necessary, secondly, to take seriously the contention that religious critique plays a real and vital role in civil discourse. Religious practices do sometimes threaten people and warp communities; it sometimes does become necessary to intervene, if only to ensure that the religious involvement of the citizens of those communities has indeed been voluntary. However, there is more than one angle of approach to such

concerns. Of first importance is the difference between those who hold that the misdemeanors of certain religious observers and institutions are ultimately distinguishable from the phenomenon of religion, and those who hold that religion is, by nature, abusive. Neither group will be disposed to overlook the misdemeanors of religious groups, but the difference in approach will determine the range of solutions they each are inclined to pursue. A person who believes that the misdemeanors of the religious can be isolated from religion *per se* will be more inclined to address those problems with a scalpel, seeking to excise corruption while leaving religion as much as possible to its own devices. The other perspective will incline more toward the sledgehammer, hoping to eliminate the abuses by the *fait accompli* of eliminating religion altogether.

The latter goal, as *God Is Not Great* acknowledges, may well be impossible; *The End of Faith* proves more sanguine about the possibility. But even having anticipated the survival of religion, Hitchens belongs to the sledgehammer school. The problem, as he sees it, lies not in the corruptibility of all human institutions, but in the very nature of religion. And so we see him joining Dawkins in calling for the arrest and prosecution of Pope Benedict XVI “for crimes against humanity,”<sup>1</sup> a sweeping gesture that seems to have been calculated more for press reaction than for the slim chance that it would ever lead to legal action. Neither Dawkins nor Hitchens seem to have asked themselves whether, in the remote chance that an international court actually managed to convict Benedict XVI, it would do anything to prevent the sexual abuse of minors. It seems entirely more likely that the arrest would create a siege atmosphere among Catholics, who would perceive the trial as an attack on Catholicism itself. Perhaps they would not be wrong in thinking so. Apart from a symbolic condemnation of the institution of the Roman Catholic Church, it remains unclear what the campaign was meant to accomplish. If the exile last century of Sultan Mohammed V from French Morocco is any index of the efficacy of international attempts to depose religious leadership, then the arrest and prosecution of the Pope would likely have led to nothing but an increase in hostility between Catholics and the partisans of secularism. Surely that would have been particularly disastrous in Hitchens and Dawkins’ own United Kingdom, where the struggle for an independent North has long been associated with the geographical division between Catholics and the Protestant South.

In the case of those who hold that religion naturally inclines toward abuse, we may distinguish between, on the one hand, the approach from

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<sup>1</sup> “Richard Dawkins calls for arrest of Pope Benedict XVI,” Marc Horne, *The Sunday Times* (London), April 11, 2010.

particular to universal, and on the other, the approach from universal to particular. We may think of these as the particulate and holistic approaches, respectively. An otherwise unbiased person, confronted with enough examples of abusive religion, might eventually arrive at the conclusion that there is something wrong in the heart of the religion; this is the particulate approach. Meanwhile, another person might decide, holistically, that religion is rotten to the core, and interpret all subsequent encounters in light of that predisposition toward irreligion. The two may merge at the ends, but the distinction still matters since, so long as a person adheres to the character of the particulate approach, they may be swayed by evidence to the contrary. A person who approaches the evidence from the holistic position that religion is inherently poisonous will invariably find a way to confirm that premise, evidence to the contrary notwithstanding.

The point I am attempting to circumscribe is that, in either case, it is more productive to address the particulars than to attack the universal. The books of the Four Horsemen marshal in the particular only to build the case against the universal. In doing so, they undermine many of the particulate goals that would do much to redress the actual wrongs of religion. The campaign to arrest Benedict XVI served almost no practical purpose, and drew attention away from programs that might actually have gone some way toward preventing future abuses. To a certain frame of mind, the campaign represents a call for the barest form of justice, but little about it was calibrated to actually address the sexual abuse behind the charge. On the whole, when it comes to such scandals within the Catholic Church, the Horsemen have been long on moral condemnation, and pitifully short on practical solutions. The arrest campaign is just one instance in which they have allowed the holistic view to short-circuit a practical, particulate approach to a concrete problem. It is in part because they offer little beyond such blustering, high-profile campaigns that the terms with which we discuss religion must be reconsidered before we as a society can continue the discussion over the civil status of religion. A framework is needed, one that allows the debate to gravitate towards practical solutions rather than ineffectual grandstanding.

Of the Four Horsemen themselves, the harshest criticism I intend to make is simply that they ought to have known better. These are, after all, learned men, and their opinions have, in general, counted for much. Why then, when he finds himself arguing in support of fascist partisans in the Netherlands, should Harris suppose that the fault rests with everyone else? Why should Dawkins have so much faith in an inexorable moral *Zeitgeist* when he can offer no proof of its existence nor explanation for how it might work? Why should a lifelong student of history and politics like Hitchens traffic in patent enormities and an historical perspective characterized by its

almost utter lack of depth? And how can Dennett advocate political denunciation when he is aware of the historical ease with which similar programs have turned into watchwords of abuse? How could all Four be so oblivious to the myriad contradictions that infect their work? Or would it be more generous to suppose that they are not, after all, oblivious in the least?

But as I made clear in the Introduction, the subject of these essays has not been the Four Horsemen, but rather the audience that has read and, in the main, approved of their critique. In the end, the Horsemen themselves may not even prove terribly representative of their audience. In his "Response to Controversy," for example, Harris clarified (or, at least, attempted to) a passage from *The End of Faith* that seemed to suggest that the execution of religious believers may be justified on the basis of their beliefs alone.<sup>2</sup> We may breathe easier knowing that Harris is more reasonable than his polemic, but what are we to make of a public that has read, and yet objected so little, to a book that contains the bald claim that, "Some propositions are so dangerous that it may even be ethical to kill people for believing them"?<sup>3</sup> That sentence, and the fact that it required correction, make for the most vivid illustration of what was meant by saying at the outset that their rhetoric has been not only wrong by irresponsible.

Harris, with his recurring martial turns of phrase and apocalyptic overtones, certainly proves the most direct, but he is not alone in advocating perspectives – and sometimes even policy – that erode not only our civil structures, but also civility itself. Dawkins, Dennett and Hitchens have all suggested that religious upbringing should be considered a form of child abuse; Dennett and Harris have argued in favor of a political status quo that is inherently hostile to private religious belief. Even a minor aside, like Dawkins' attempt to rehabilitate the term "militant atheism," though innocuous when viewed in context, but may contribute to a militancy that is less metaphorical than he intends. All that would be required to push their arguments into outright hostility is the will to ignore or misrepresent the more pacific (and, unfortunately, marginal) aspects of each book. But even if that potential never comes to fruition, the books of the Four Horsemen still warrant scrutiny for what they can tell us about the wrong way to subject religion to criticism.



The summation that follows, then, is intended not only to tie the objections of the previous essays into a more or less unified whole. It is also meant to

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<sup>2</sup> See "The Diagnostics of Belief" for discussion.

<sup>3</sup> *TEoF*, 52-53

suggest possible outlines for the future of public dialogue about religion and atheism. In particular, it seeks to preserve the aims embodied by the two assumptions made explicit above: that of the need for an effective critique of religion, as well as for a viable space for disbelief. For each of the general objections made against the New Atheists, polemical atheists, and the Irreligious Right, there stands a converse motion, acknowledging the real and enduring issues that need to be addressed, but requiring more delicate and creative solutions than those currently prevailing in the public debate.

In "The Flattening of Historical Perspective" it was suggested that New Atheist criticisms are too often grounded in historical accounts that invite confusion, if not deliberate misrepresentation. Yet it contributes little to say that we ought to prefer accounts that do not sacrifice veracity and depth for compression and polemical value. I doubt that many of my readers would be so duplicitous as to consciously seek out historical accounts that have been simplified for no other purpose than to confirm a bias against religion. At the very least, few would brazenly admit to themselves that they choose their sources on that criteria. But this being so, why have so many readers so readily accepted New Atheist accounts like those we find in the books of the Four Horsemen?

I hope I am not being naive by suggesting that a principle cause of the confusion rests with the lack of a clear and agreed upon set of criteria for dealing with historical example. Without some such set of guidelines, it can be all too tempting to draw poorly considered and facile conclusions. It may be tempting to derive from a complex example, like that of the 2002 Gujarat riots, a simple arithmetic, and to suppose that the formula applies equally well whenever religion is present. By the steady accumulation of such examples, it is possible to build a dubiously general condemnation of religion, the sum of which may be seen in Harris' overblown rhetoric of a zero-sum conflict – one that must end with either the total abandonment of religious faith, or in the total destruction of civilization.

If the question is, what can history tell us about religion, then it is necessary to begin by asking which historical episodes may be most relied upon to tell us the truth. Faced with the historical contributions of both a Father Munyeshyaka and a Father Dhelo, how are we to decide which, if either, better represents the character of religion? Reliability in scientific experiments is often calculated as the ratio of signal to noise, with the best results being those which admit of the least noise. Noise in this case signifies any information that attends an observation, but which is incidental to the inquiry. Part of what we are asking, then, when we inquire after the most reliable historical episodes, is which contain the least noise. When we consider the hypothesis that religion motivates a great deal of violent

conflict, the first step should be to find examples where we can credibly rule out other potential motives. Given any two historical episodes where religion may be credibly suggested as a motive force, the one for which fewer non-religious motives may also be credibly suggested will be the more useful for discerning the civil and historical role of religion.

Dennett's insistence on *cui bono* explanations may be useful here, though he rarely puts it to such use. When we asked of the Gujurat riots, for example, who stood to benefit from the violence, it immediately became clear that a political party, the Bharatiya Janata, had a role in both stirring up unrest and preventing the police from intervening. That the B.J.P. explicitly tied religious identity to its political goal of redressing the historical effects of British and Persian imperialism can only complicate our assessment. Harris seems to have recognized those complications, but his insistence on the exclusively religious character of the violence does nothing to alter facts that are clear once we refer to his sources. Rather than suggest a means of sorting the signal from the noise, he has merely denied the appearance of any noise at all.

Judging from the examples offered by the Four Horsemen, political motives make for a strikingly prevalent form of noise. To what extent, for example, can we rule them out of a historical episode like the Spanish Inquisition, particularly when we note that it was carried out by an office of the Spanish Crown, often in conflict with its loyalties to the Vatican? The profit motive likewise complicates historical inquiry, and events like the Crusades and the conquest of the Americas prove less straightforward as indictments of religion once we acknowledge how much there was to gain in loot and territory by such endeavors. Recognizing as much does not amount to a concession that all religious violence will turn out to be, on closer inspection, political or economic violence, but intellectual honesty requires that we acknowledge the complexity involved in sorting religious from secular motives.

If we are serious about learning the nature of religion from a study of history, then we must begin by preferring less ambiguous historical examples. Ideal examples – that is, those in which the role of religion is totally unencumbered by the “noise” of the broad range of possible secular motives – may prove to be exceedingly rare. What matters is that we resolve to be conscientious in choosing the least affected examples, and of dealing conscientiously with the ambiguities that do arise. No doubt some will see their favorite arguments hamstrung by that criteria, but it amounts to nothing more prejudicial than the suggestion that we should prefer unbiased inquiry to polemical advantage.

To that we may add a second corrective, one which seeks to place historical particulars in a broader context. One problem that has always confronted the historian is that of where any given historical event begins



and ends. Ultimately, it may be that the impression we have of there being discrete historical events, like the Cold War or the Enlightenment, amounts to little more than useful artifice. Much depends on the distance we choose to stand from such events, and the information that we choose to include. Some historical patterns are found only by relying on a form of historical myopia, whether as a failure of inquiry or a deliberate blinkering. Dawkins' assertion of a discernible, sawtoothed moral progression is one such construction placed on history rather than found in it. To maintain it requires that he leave measurements vague, such as the gauge of the sawtooth spanning from the end of Roman slavery to the beginning of the Atlantic slave trade.

Similarly, the essay "Covert Theology" addressed the rhetorical constructions on which New Atheist arguments against the existence of God depend. Central to my critical purpose in that essay was the point that, despite their protestations against the discipline, the arguments the Horsemen have brought against theism constitute their own form of theology. Dawkins presented the most thorough and explicit exercise in theology, but in each case the theological effort was Pyrrhic by design. To the extent that such arguments work at all, they work by prevailing upon the theist to first accept a theology, like Dawkins' "God Hypothesis," that is built to self-destruct.

What is striking about these efforts, then, is their logical futility. It is no accomplishment to overcome a logical defense that you yourself have designed for the purpose of being overcome. Such arguments work best, I suspect, against those who are already in doubt over the existence of gods, and to whom the adoption of a fatally flawed theology presents a welcome opportunity to settle the matter once and for all. No doubt such opportunities come as a relief to those whose already eroded belief has left them only nominally theist, and we should not underestimate the comfort such covert theological cases afford in those cases. Still, some less surreptitious means of confirming that disposition would be more honest.

And what is the effect on a confirmed theist of something like Dawkins' argument? If the theology presented by his God Hypothesis fails to correspond to the theists' conception of God, then why should we expect it to have an effect at all? True, it may happen that the theist will decide early in the course of reading *The God Delusion* that Dawkins' account of God is more reasonable than her own. But having read Dawkins' rebuttal, it seems likely that she will either revert to her prior conception, or else find a way to salvage what appealed to her in Dawkins' Hypothesis.

There remains the remote possibility that the God Hypothesis will correspond in every significant particular to the theology the theist takes with her into her reading of *The God Delusion*, and that Dawkins' criticism

of that theology will thus address her actual beliefs quite directly. Is the theist then driven perforce to atheism? Still the answer is no, since all Dawkins has managed to show is that the God Hypothesis is flawed; he has not thereby demonstrated that all conceptions of deity are impossible, and a person who values their theism is as likely to settle on some other conception as they are to abandon theism altogether. That may seem a specious dodge, but is the theist who prefers the least assailable theology any less blameworthy than the atheist who constructs his theology with an eye toward implosion?

That process has repeated itself throughout history. It is, in fact, part of the process of theology itself, a fact which Dennett presents as the defensive retreat of religious belief from the assault of skepticism. But as I argued in "Covert Theology," this mistakes theology for apologetic. The former furnishes concepts and arguments to the latter. Indeed, apologetic could hardly function without input from theology. But theology is first and foremost a tool for subjecting notions of deity to logical correction, while apologetic exists solely to convert the unbeliever. The first is philosophical in method, while the latter is more properly rhetorical. The shift from theology to rhetoric is likewise apparent in the arguments presented by Dawkins against the God Hypothesis. He builds his Hypothesis by a genuine, though deliberately faulty, process of theological thought, but the process of tearing it down again constitutes a form of atheist apologetic. That shift goes a long way toward explaining the futility of such arguments in the face of a comfortable theism, just as the same shift explains why religious apologetic rarely fails to do more than annoy an atheist comfortable with his own lack of belief.

There has, as yet, been no silver bullet to destroy the theological premise, and so long as the notion of deity remains capable of detachment to any observed and isolated phenomenon, I cannot see how there ever will be one. Given the improbability of ever resolving, once and for all, the question of whether gods exist, it becomes critical to ask what purpose such debates serve, and then to ask whether that purpose justifies the effort apologists and polemicists invest in it. In *The God Delusion*, at least, it is clear that the debate is meant to undermine religion at the level of its "factual premise." Destroy the keystone, the premise goes, and the entire edifice will topple.

For anyone who hopes to avert the dangers to which we are sometimes exposed by religious institutions, the appeal is clear. The attempt to disprove the existence of gods promises the greatest effect with the least amount of effort. At the cost of little more than a clever bit of reasoning, the rhetor averts an entire category of wrongs. But as it turns out, the long effort expended on the attempt to devise a proper silver bullet for religion has yet to pay dividends of that sort. Nor is there any guarantee that a foolproof argument against theism would result in the practical end it seems designed

to achieve. There lurks an obvious temptation in the idea that it is possible to solve a real and immediate problem, like the sexual abuse of minors, by unravelling the logic of the institution in which such problems have arisen, but it has invariably been more practical to address such problems directly, on the scale of the abuse rather than on that of the background of beliefs which have, in any case, only an indirect relation to the abuse. The critic of religion who addresses himself to mundane practical matters, like the administrative structure of the church, or the implementation of oversight procedures, will almost always do more to avert abuse than the polemicist who attempts to destroy religion at the level of belief.

It is, after all, by no means clear that belief functions in the roughly diagnostic way implied by New Atheist accounts. "The Diagnostics of Belief" confronted Harris' contention that religious belief, particularly when schematized as "faith," necessarily entails predictably destructive behavior. Elevated to the status of invariable mechanical law, the premise that beliefs function as principles of behavior ends by blurring the line between belief and behavior, making it possible to rationalize responding to an expression of belief with disproportionate force. To the contrary, experience suggests that some other faculty often mediates between two.

Here we find a strict conception of Rationalism at odds with a sincere humanism. We cannot ignore the intervening part played by those other faculties without eroding the humanistic principles developed over the course of the last several centuries. Among the Four Horsemen, the most explicit in repudiating that vein of humanism is Harris, in his insistence that rights of conscience are illusory. But if we want to carry on a conscientious debate over the status of belief, we must begin by recognizing the specifically human element. This means, first of all, resisting the urge to treat statements of belief as though they were equivalent to behavior, or to subject them to the same degree of intervention that we might apply to physical violence. There has been, on the whole, a tendency to treat the beliefs of others as though they were rightly subject to a nearly unconstrained program of extrapolation and interpretation, even as we zealously guard our own beliefs against the same program. To carry on the discussion in good faith, it will be necessary to recognize that the experience, formation and effects of belief rarely prove as predictable and mechanistic as the rationalistic ideal.

Because we are all (as Dennett, at least, acknowledges) outsiders, caution is called for when attempting to represent the character of a person's beliefs, or of those aggregates of belief we call schools of thought, or faiths. The books of the Four Horsemen exhibit a satirical tendency that deliberately eschews caution. I have no objection to satire *per se*; in its proper hour and place it may prove as useful for the understanding as it is for polemic. But

here the use is wholly polemical, and the authors never turn from satire to the commiseration necessary for an honest representation of religion as it is believed. They are careful to draw a category distinction between the sort of beliefs they themselves entertain and the sort of beliefs found in religion, which are, as far as they are concerned, ultimately reducible to a pathology.

That unwillingness to compass religious beliefs in any but polemical terms betrays a signal disingenuousness. It takes the form of an exaggerated even-handedness, as though they had bent over backward to give religion the benefit of the doubt. *Breaking the Spell* provides the most emphatic example, endlessly cajoling its religious readers to meet it halfway. Indeed, a great deal of emphasis is needed to offset the initial impression, made by the analogy between religion and a brain fluke that appears on the book's first several pages. Those who suppose that he protests overmuch in his calls for an open mind and even hand will no doubt feel their suspicions confirmed when, in later chapters, Dennett's "best" scientific explanation for the origins of religion presume to confirm the accuracy of brain fluke analogy, as though it had been nothing more than a fortuitous and well-conjectured hypothesis.

A further disingenuousness lies in their dismissal of less straightjacketed forms of belief. Even as they insist on satire as the proper mode for representing religious belief, the authors struggle against the similar misrepresentations to which atheism has long been subject. Dawkins and Harris, in particular, take issue with the notion that atheism entails nihilism; that it is incapable of supporting morality; that it leads to a sterile rationalism or a pseudo-religious scientism in which only chance accounts for the emergence of existence from absolute nothingness, without however providing for meaning. Harris goes a step further by denying that a rational atheism is irreconcilable with a spiritual outlook.

Not only are the Four Horsemen entitled to argue for a more nuanced and various view of atheism, but a substantive and honest appraisal of the topic utterly demands the correction of popular misconceptions and downright misrepresentation. Since they see with such clear eyes the need to frame their own positions with clarity and honesty, why then are they so eager to straightjacket religious belief? To insist that it may be adequately understood by viewing it through the lens of parody? To assert the priority of least common denominator versions of doctrine? They would allow none of the same constraints to be placed on secular atheists. To be generous, we may suppose that they have simply fallen victim to the all too common trap of human subjectivity, perspective giving what is closest to them the solidity of the genuinely real, while all that they have put at a distance is bathed in quicksilver. Less generously, perhaps their interest lies first of all in polemic, and no rhetorical turn can distort honest appraisal too much for them so long as it slips past scrutiny. The necessary corrective to such

polemically motivated distortion begins by endeavoring to take seriously the essential identity of the variety to which religious and secular beliefs are prone. It can be acknowledged that they differ with respect to subject matter, without at the same time supposing functional differences that necessarily invalidate the one over the other.

Moreover, the attempt to condemn religion for the way in which it employs the profession of belief depends on a questionable narrowing of the subject. "The Taxonomy of Religion" argues that beliefs codified as creed may not necessarily form the core of the phenomenon. Rather, what we find when we make an extensive inquiry into comparative religion is the prevalence of ritual. Most often belief serves as an adjunct to those rituals, or is itself ritualized, as with the recitation of the Nicene Creed. This suggests a division of use: on the one hand, religious doctrines enhance the rituals of religious observance; on the other, they are sometimes brokered into the secular sphere in order to bolster claims of dubious value, both to secularism and to the religions from which those creeds derive. It could be credibly argued, for example, that the debate over the status of Creationism in American public school curricula represents the transfer of beliefs that play a comprehensible role in religious ritual, into a domain where they play a less useful role.

Even granting that, it would be overreaching to suggest that the best way to guard against the misapplication of religious doctrine would be to oppose the doctrines themselves. Moreover, it would be fallacious to judge those doctrines outside of the context to which they belong. A project of inquiry and judgment, like that demanded by *Breaking the Spell*, is incomplete so long as it considers the content of religious doctrine in isolation from its employment in ritual practice. Stephen Jay Gould's conception of "non-overlapping magisteria" may resemble an ideal to be sought more than it does an accurate description of the normal state of affairs, but the struggle to expunge religious belief altogether as a measure against its encroachment on the secular sphere is bound only to inspire further entrenchment. By insisting on those terms, we contribute to the construction of the sort of zero-sum conflict that the polemical atheists insist is inherent in the relationship between religion and science.



The most vivid reflection of the alleged incompatibility between religion and science arises over the project to oppose a religious morality to one grounded exclusively in scientific method. "Landscapes and Zeitgeists" examined the difficulties involved, but it would be more to the point to say that the entire project is ill-conceived, not least of all because it naïvely

gives substance to that purported conflict. Having to his own satisfaction repudiated the suggestion that religion can be counted upon to furnish sound moral principles, the New Atheist runs to the opposite pole in order to salvage morality from the hazards of an ontological relativism. In doing so, he finds himself prone to much that he found objectionable in religious moralization: its authoritarianism, its mysticism, its inconsistency. The program conflates ontological relativism with cognitive relativism, such that, in order to dispel any prospect of moral relativism whatsoever, it becomes necessary to fashion a passable impression of the goal that two and a half millennia of intense philosophical inquiry has yet to achieve, that of an objective system of ethics. In the course of meeting the demands of that system, the Horsemen run the risk of inadvertently undermining the liberal principles that animated their entire project, and in the final analysis they have only succeeded in elaborating a system of casuistry.

The first step toward unravelling that morass is to emphasize the functional difference between ontological and cognitive relativism. To recognize that our conception of moral principles is relative to the context from which each of us examines the issues involved does nothing to imply that morality itself is relative. Conscious of cognitive relativism, we may be more inclined to deal sympathetically with differing conceptions of morality. It becomes possible to acknowledge, despite Dawkins' assertions to the contrary, that some of us do in fact derive moral principles from religious observance. Moreover, we are logically compelled to admit that religious morality is no less epistemically privileged than its secular counterpart. Saying so does nothing to imply that those moral differences are equally valid. We need not defer to a morality with which we do not agree, but by the same token, the person espousing it need not defer to ours either.

That in itself may be fatal to the Horsemen's polemical purpose in constructing a scientific ethics. Harris has made it clear that the intent of *The Moral Landscape* is to constitute an ethical elite, capable of dictating authoritative answers to moral questions in defiance of any subjective moral responsibility. That this would allow science to dispense with religious moral claims seems to be very much the heart of his ethical program. But if we affirm cognitive relativism – if, that is to say, we maintain that there may, after all, be right and wrong answers to moral questions, but that attempts to deduce those answers remain limited by our capacity for moral knowledge – then how can we hope to confront the moral lapses that we find among the religious? On the principle of starting simple, we may begin by addressing those lapses over which there is already general agreement. In the case of the sexual abuse scandals currently rocking the Roman Catholic Church, there seems to be little disagreement: there are no doctrines in the Church that allow for such abuse, and even devout Catholics seem horrified

by the revelations. The abuses have occurred not because of Catholic morality, but in spite of it. Rather than taking it as an opportunity to condemn the entire domain of religious morality, then, the productive solution is to cooperate with Catholic institutions in order to curb the incidence of abuse. Something of the sort has, indeed, taken place, with secular and Catholic organizations in the United States cooperating to draft new guidelines for clerical ordination. Those efforts took place largely without assistance from the polemical atheists represented by the Four Horsemen, who were occupied by the demands of making political hay over the scandals.

Where religious and secular groups differ over the answers to moral questions, the public discussion necessarily becomes more complex. Genuine moral concern will almost inevitably lead to debate in such cases, with each side attempting to convince the other to adopt its position. To some degree, such debate will remain unavoidable, but it can at least be conducted with the sympathy that comes of recognizing that moral difference arises as a consequence of epistemic limitations that we all share. Where those debates remain in a state of unresolved tension, the best we can do may be to carve out an appropriate social space in which each side of the dispute is free to practice their moral scheme to as great an extent as possible.

If, in order to preserve the right to practice morality according to one's own personal responsibility, it becomes necessary to intervene in some practice that the perpetrator holds as a religious obligation, then so be it. Though intellectual honesty may compel us to admit that we can have no objective knowledge of moral truth, nor can we remain neutral on a moving train. But we should be circumspect in doing so, and cognizant that the most logically compelling reason for doing so is not the presumption that we know better, but rather, that the subjective nature of our moral knowledge requires us to give the potential victim the same opportunity to exercise their conscience that we give to the perpetrator. That necessarily implies the principle expressed by Mill's *On Liberty*, to the effect that every right of conscience must be permitted, save that which withholds the same rights to others.

In so saying, we only reiterate the finest traditions of Western liberalism, but in light of some of the suggestions of the Irreligious Right it has been necessary to defend those principles against erosion, however well intentioned. "The Heirs of *La Coterie Holbachique*" suggested the ways in which the New Atheists reflect an 18<sup>th</sup> century program for limiting religion, in large part by overlooking or repudiating the moderating influences of the intervening centuries. The trains of thought derived from Enlightenment critics like D'Holbach were, in their original context,

anything but conservative, because there was, as yet, no secular/liberal tradition to protect. The *philosophes* were, with every encyclopedic entry, every historical reinterpretation, challenging the dominant culture of *la regime ancien*. Viewed in that historical context, those arguments must be judged radical. To now reassert those doctrines – and whatever the Horsemen may insist to the contrary, they have, in fact, become doctrinal – is what it never could have been before the age of Revolution: a political conservatism.

A particularly interesting aspect of that historical inheritance rests with the New Atheist advocacy of *ideal* history. Under that view, the historian is able to see discrete events not as the organic growth of incommensurable social, economic, political, cultural and natural forces, but as illustrations of universal principles in the progressive tendency of human civilization. We see that reflected not only in Dawkins' naive elaboration of a moral *Zeitgeist*, but more commonly in the supposition of an innate and eternal opposition between religion and reason, or religion and science, or religion and civil society. When that opposition is invoked to explain specific historical episodes of religious conflict – be it the death of Socrates or modern struggles over the teaching of evolution – it functions to ignore, if not outright deny, the role played by secular and historically contingent factors. With an event like the 2002 Gujarat riots, Harris suggests that the parts played by historical, political, ethnic and economic factors are ultimately negligible since, even without them, the mere presence of religious differences would have led to violence. In support of that view, he relies not on evidence or logical argument, but rather on an unstated conception of ideal history inherited from the Enlightenment.

If the public discussion over religion and atheism are to escape the ruts in which they have entrenched themselves, we must learn to see both positions in the context of an organic, historical growth. In the case of modern Western atheism, the first step will be to turn a critical eye on the 18<sup>th</sup> century French materialists, *Encyclopediasts* and Economists, in full recognition that they may well have been wrong, not only over particulars, but also in asserting universals. They wrote for a particular context, one dominated by the history of Western Catholicism and the more recent struggle between Catholicism and Protestantism. Much has changed in the modern era, including the diversification of the religious milieu available to the West. Secularists could do much worse than to approach religion from a perspective of inquiry unaffected by 18<sup>th</sup> century theory.

In part, the New Atheists have made consideration of that broader milieu negligible by how they have defined their allies and enemies. In doing so, they render a very complex field in reductive binary terms: for and against. By their account, Eastern traditions like Buddhism and Taoism may not be religions at all; Harris goes so far as to construe Buddhism as a brand of



rationalism. Pantheists and deists, likewise, prove to be *de facto* atheists. Dawkins claims that scientists naturally resist categorization as religious observers, even when they adopt that category themselves. These forged alliances and others have been examined, in “A Drawing of Lines,” as an extension of the martial metaphor that rings in the language of some polemical atheists. This is nowhere more clear than in the books of Harris, where the syntax of battle rings throughout, and division – both between ally and enemy as well as within the enemy ranks – is a recurring motif. But it is likewise implicit in the work of his companion authors, most often in pseudo-anthropological or eugenic terms, as when Dennett and Dawkins speculate on the intelligence of the religious *yeas* as opposed to that of the atheist *nays*, or when Dawkins speculates that religious belief may be the result of psychological dysfunction. The implication, that religious beliefs not only result in qualitative differences but must also stem from inherent quantitative differences between persons, ought to have been at least faintly appalling to their readers. It suggests that same sort of shallow diagnoses that allowed Colonial apologists to argue for the native inability of colonized non-Europeans to aspire to the level of “civilization” foisted upon them by European mercantile interests.

Given that polemical atheists have made a veritable tribe of irreligion, the argument that religion is inherently divisive does not lack for irony. At nearly every juncture where the rhetoric of the Four Horsemen has gone wrong, sometimes appallingly so, the first wrong step proves to be a giving way to the temptation to see religious believers, even those aptly described as “moderate,” as an entrenched enemy, not only of secularism but of civilization. The argument that religious moderation should be held responsible for the fundamentalist excesses it “enables” amounts to little more than a rhetorical device, allowing polemicists to force all religious observers into the same militarized camp. The temptation to see religious practitioners and atheists as inherently at odds infects the debate. It too often leads such polemicists to draw unwarranted conclusions about the nature of religion, and to seek out solutions to a trumped up “problem of religion” by striking at people and institutions rather than at behaviors and policies. It has lately given rise to tensions within the secular ranks, as outspoken atheists divide off into New Atheist and “accommodationist” camps.

A responsibly conducted public debate will begin by resisting such factionalism. That this need be said at all serves as an index of just how successful the polemical discourse has been. Hitchens has quipped that a person cannot be reasoned out of a position that they were not reasoned into, but it is by drawing such lines, particularly when they are presented as stemming from innate differences, that polemical atheists preclude any

possibility of arriving at rational agreement. The Four Horsemen have routinely called for a public discussion on the social import of religion, but nothing could be more fatal to genuine dialogue. If we hope to correct that circumstance, it will be necessary to backtrack a great deal. A new middle ground will need to be cleared away, one sufficiently distant from New Atheist perceptions about, as well as polemical atheist discourse against, religion and its practitioners.

Our concern with the work of the Four Horsemen, then, is not yet that they represent whole cloth any widespread trend of opinion, but rather that they mark a low ebb in public debate. Their books have been accepted by mainstream opinion as vital contributions to the discussion over religion, its history, its function, and the part it has played and continues to play in setting the conditions which influence contemporary life. Despite their assertions to the contrary, such discussion has likely been an imperative of public discourse in every civilization touched by religious life. We need only look in order to find evidence of such dialogue in a variety of historical contexts, from the fine tradition of American debate leading to and proceeding from the Establishment Clause, to the broad and various literature of formative Christianity, of which the *Civitas deo* of Augustine is only the most visible remnant; from the *ijtihad* tradition of medieval Islam to the Confucian inquiry into piety and ritual. We could hardly be said to favor such discourse if we were to begrudge the New Atheists the opportunity to voice their grievances, but it speaks little for the current state of discussion when the names of such brazen and misleading polemicists as Harris, Dawkins, Dennett and Hitchens become the shibboleths by which entry into the discussion is gained.

And yet, only so much blame can be justly laid at the feet of the Four Horsemen. They hold the bulk of responsibility for the opinions they espouse, and they have been ceaseless promoters of those positions, but if they have contributed to a flattening of public discourse, they have been abetted by a wide and influential audience. On the strength of book sales alone we may number that audience in the millions. It has earned its title of accessory-after-the-fact not by any overt endorsement of the Irreligious Right – though some have, with varying degrees of acumen, done just that. Rather, by allowing those books to set the terms of discussion with so few objections – and more, by failing (or worse, refusing) to acknowledge any other form of discourse – we have, in effect, surrendered to the dubious conclusions to which the Four Horsemen have led us. I present these ten essays as an initial contribution toward the goal of freeing discussion to pursue more productive forms of engagement. They amount to a clearing of the throat, preliminary to a conversation conducted in better faith than that suggested by New Atheist and polemicist accounts

Those accounts find their purest and most disconcerting expression in the outlines of an increasingly political program. The constitution of that loose political affiliation, as well as the dangers to which it is prone, were examined in "The Irreligious Right." In its current incarnation, the Irreligious Right depends for its internal cohesiveness on the carefully constructed perceptions of the New Atheists, as described in the earlier essays. The core issues to which the Irreligious Right addresses itself were elaborated by the discourse of polemical atheists. The political persuasion represents a turn away from mere rhetoric and the crystallization of those perceptions and discourse in the beginnings of a program of action.

In so doing, the Irreligious Right has achieved a curious inversion. They may, in the end, serve as bellwethers of a broader social shift whereby members of what has historically been known as secular liberalism establish a limit on the extent of its liberality. In truth, the movement toward liberalism has always shown evidence of an internal tension, represented by the question, "how much freedom is too much?" As history and experience continually remind, few secular liberals, manage to adhere scrupulously to the principle that all things should be permitted so long as they infringe on the right of no one; nearly all have at least one blind spot, one behavior so unpalatable that, when confronted with it, they lose their scruple.

This remains the conservative element in secular liberalism, the caveat which cries out, *something must be preserved!* The Irreligious Right has made a staging ground of the question of religion. The theme that binds the books of the Four Horsemen, the leitmotif from which a secular conservatism is composed, is the idea that liberalism can be preserved only by ensuring the retreat of religion. Popular endorsement of that theme is, as yet, only fragmentary, and has yet to cohere into an organized political platform, but continues to move in that direction as New Atheists and polemical atheists adopt political stances and distinguish themselves not only from religious believers but also from "accommodationist" atheists. The most conservative formulation is Harris' insistence on a clash of civilizations, complete with an apocalyptic vision of the future, which secular liberals must win if anyone is to survive. In the face of that urgency, it grows difficult to see how anyone who accepts his perspective could avoid translating it into a policy designed to defer that future.

That political inclination threatens to change the entire tone of the public discussion. It implies that the question of religion no longer belongs fully to a discussion between equals, but has passed over to the domain of a social and governmental authority with the power to dictate terms to the religious adherent. Where those policy suggestions trample on the traditionally liberal "rights of conscience," the believer has good reason to regard them as a threat to their personal liberty. Crucially, the same often proves true when

the positions of the religious are fashioned into political platforms, and indeed, it seems likely that the political forays of the Irreligious Right have been inspired, not without irony, by the aggressive political agenda of the American Religious Right. A robust separation of church and state must go both ways, but to be truly effective the struggle to ensure that separation must be held at arms length from the anti-religious and anti-theistic polemic reflected in the Four Horsemen. So long as it remains connected to the assertion that religion is inherently anathema to civil society, or to suggestions that religious believers are unfit for public service, many within the religious community will continue to regard it with suspicion, and the chances of a social accord will continue to diminish.

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